



THE AFFILIATE MARKETING

PLAYBOOK

Affiliate strategy and solutions for ambitious
brands to scale up in 2026 and beyond.

2026

**Your 2026 affiliate
journey starts here**



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Your 2026 affiliate journey starts here

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ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

Fresh Perspectives & Actionable Advice

Following the popularity of *Your Affiliate Guide for 2025*, we were determined to return in 2026 with fresh perspectives and genuinely actionable advice for brands on their affiliate growth journey. While last year's edition was built entirely on insights from our amazing Publisher partners, this time we went a step further. Alongside Publishers, we also spoke with several brand-side affiliate marketers.

We began by asking our Advertisers a simple question: what do you most want to understand to accelerate growth in 2026? We then put the most common questions to a range of leading Publishers to capture their expertise and perspectives. You'll find their insights and advice at the end of each chapter.

These questions also helped shape the structure of this Playbook, which evolved into three key sections based on what brands most wanted to know. As you move through the guide, you'll find each section and topic unpacked by members of the Webgains Client Services team.

01 – The Journey

How modern customer behaviour is reshaping affiliate growth

02 – The Partnerships

Understanding how networks, brands and publishers create value together in 2026

03 – The Evolution

How affiliate marketing is evolving and how brands should prepare

Essential reading for ambitious Advertisers, our Playbook focuses specifically on affiliate expertise and growth strategy for brands. With practical checklists throughout, it provides a strong foundation for brands looking to build their affiliate growth strategy in 2026 and beyond.

If you have any questions about the contents of this Playbook or would like to discuss how to turn these ideas into action, we'd love to hear from you. **Please get in touch via [Webgains.com](https://webgains.com) or email hello@webgains.com.**

Enjoy the guide. We hope it becomes a valuable asset to your journey, partnerships and evolution in 2026 and beyond.

Webgains



FEATURED PUBLISHERS

Expertise From Across the Affiliate Channel



**NEXT UP?
PART 1 -
THE JOURNEY**

THE JOURNEY

How modern customer behaviour is
reshaping affiliate growth



Charlie Lynn

Head of Client Services
Webgains



Dom Doherty

Account Director
Webgains

1.1. SCALING YOUR PROGRAM

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



The 80/20 rule often applies in affiliate programs. Many brands prioritise last-click efficiency, leaning heavily on conversion-led partners such as voucher, cashback and retargeting. While these partners deliver consistent ROAS and strong CPA, they typically harvest existing demand rather than generate new demand. In reality, sustainable growth comes when affiliate activity moves beyond conversion and starts influencing the earlier stages of the customer journey - this is where true scale is unlocked.

Upper and mid funnel investment sits at the point of discovery and consideration. This is where brands reach new audiences and help shape purchase decisions before a consumer is actively searching for a discount code. Historically, hesitation around these placements has come down to control and budget commitments. Fixed fee editorial placements can feel uncertain in terms of return, influencer partnerships have lacked accountability, and performance and incrementality has sometimes been difficult to prove.

Discovery, not discounts unlocks affiliate scale.

In recent years the channel has evolved.

Today, CPC and hybrid CPA or CPC models allow brands to apply performance principles to awareness activity. Instead of committing to large sponsorship fees, platforms such as Linkby allow brands to access premium publishers on a capped CPC basis. We often describe this as turning what used to be “performance PR” into measurable traffic acquisition.

1.1. Scaling Your Program

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



Brands want and need to shift their reliance on walled garden media. Spend can now be forecast and scaled based on click performance and downstream revenue. This means upper funnel exposure can be evaluated with the same commercial discipline used in paid channels – in some cases more measurable. Where affiliate redirects once raised SEO concerns and questioned content value, evolving AI and changing consumer research behaviour now enable those redirects to be interpreted and leveraged to inform decision-making.

Influencer affiliate platforms such as [Metapic](#) are helping brands unlock creator audiences through CPA models, sometimes supported by optional CPC layers to expand reach. This reduces the risk traditionally associated with influencer activity while still giving brands room to scale. In practice, this means awareness activity remains commercially accountable.

Mid funnel discovery platforms such as [Ufurnish.com](#) show how affiliates can support consideration, particularly for higher value and research heavy purchases in the home sector. By offering CPA and CPC models, these platforms allow brands to increase product visibility during the research stage. As a result, brands can influence consumers earlier, before they enter the conversion driven last click ecosystem.

When brands influence research moments, they shape purchase decisions long before the final click.

When we discuss this with brands, measurement often needs reframing. Upper and mid funnel affiliate activity should not be judged only by last-click ROAS. Instead, we encourage brands to consider several wider indicators:

1.1. Scaling Your Program

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



- New customer rate
- Assisted conversions, time and path to purchase impact
- Incremental revenue lift
- Repeat purchase
- CPC efficiency compared with paid social and paid search benchmarks

When measured in this way, upper and mid funnel affiliate investment does not cannibalise performance. It expands the addressable audience. It feeds demand into lower funnel partners, improves overall program health and unlocks incremental growth, works with paid channels and acknowledges consumer behaviours.

Upper funnel affiliate activity expands demand. It does not dilute performance.

Scaling beyond last-click is not about diluting efficiency. It is about investing strategically in the stages of the journey that create future efficiency.

How ready are you to scale in 2026? Head to my checklist on the next page to find out!





CHARLIE'S CHECKLIST

Is your program upper-and mid-funnel ready?

Strategic Fit

- ✓ **Affiliate is positioned** beyond last-click conversion
- ✓ **Upper and mid-funnel** activity is treated as demand creation
- ✓ **Affiliate objectives** are aligned with paid media and brand goals

Partner & Commercial Model

- ✓ **Premium publishers** are activated on CPC or hybrid CPA/CPC models
- ✓ **Influencer activity** is performance-led, not fixed-fee
- ✓ **Mid-funnel discovery** partners are mapped to researched purchase journeys

Control & Measurement

- ✓ **CPCs are capped** and benchmarked against paid search and paid social
- ✓ **Success is measured** beyond last-click ROAS
- ✓ **New customer rate** and assisted conversions are actively reviewed

Incrementality & Scale

- ✓ **Upper and mid-funnel** activity is assessed at program level, not in isolation
- ✓ **Learnings feed** into lower-funnel performance and optimisation
- ✓ **Budget can be scaled** when efficiency thresholds are met

How does your affiliate program score in this area?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



**NEXT UP?
WHAT THE
PUBLISHERS SAID**

SCALING YOUR PROGRAM

What the Publishers said...

**IMMEDIATE
MEDIA**^{CO}

"Repetition – multiple links in articles and targeting the same audience several times in different ways to build brand awareness before generating a sale."

Linkby.

"Scaling up your content strategy to be present where your potential audiences are in the consideration stage, investing in awareness as well as lower funnel conversion activity & futureproofing the pivot to shopping behaviour via AI LLM's is a sure-fire way to get your brand in front of more potential customers at scale. "

SOVENDUS

"The real unlock is distribution through adjacent ecosystems. Instead of competing for attention in saturated channels, brands should embed themselves into other brands' customer journeys. Post-purchase environments, closed user bases, and partner-led placements offer deterministic scale with far less wastage. The common thread across the strongest performers is not channel novelty, but contextual relevance at scale."

gocertify

"Smart, verified offers embedded in the customer journey turn paid traffic into identified, re-marketable audiences. Scale comes from first-party data, not more impressions."

SCALING YOUR PROGRAM

What the Publishers said...

Shoperize

"Brands are successfully generating incremental sales from Google Shopping by adding a CPA-based CSS partner to their existing campaigns. The Shopping Ads ecosystem fundamentally changed after the EU's CSS ruling, but many brands still haven't acted on it. The opportunity: you can run CSS partner campaigns alongside your own Google Shopping efforts without conflict or cannibalisation. "

GENIE SHOPPING

"Comparison Shopping Services (CSS) are an absolute goldmine for brands looking to target in-market consumers at scale. Perfectly designed to work in partnership with your existing Shopping activity, CSS give you access to active audiences across millions of search terms, all on an efficient CPA model.

What makes CSS partnerships so powerful? Unlike many channels, CSS gives you access to an almost unlimited pool of audience segments, and in turn, countless opportunities to drive efficient and incremental performance."

SKIMLINKS

"Mentions are money. As AI and LLMs continue to reshape shopping, the sources they draw on for their responses and overviews are broad, so incentivising a diverse range of partners ensures you the best options for visibility in front of in-market shoppers."

1.2. MODERN CUSTOMER JOURNEYS

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



Customer journeys are no longer linear, this continues to evolve alongside economic conditions.

Across the commerce market, we have seen a clear shift in consumer behaviour. Purchase frequency has declined, while average order values have risen. Ongoing financial pressure is also making purchase journeys longer and more research-led. Shoppers are spending more time comparing products, validating reviews and building confidence before committing to spend. Reviews are no longer confined to traditional platforms alone, with creators and influencers now playing an increasingly important role in shaping purchase decisions.

Customers are buying less often but researching far more before making a decision.

As journeys become more considered, brand loyalty weakens. Product relevance, perceived value and trust now play a far greater role in determining which brands convert at the moment of choice.

Today's purchase decisions are driven more by trust and value than by brand loyalty.

In this chapter, I explore:

- How the customer journey has lengthened as consumers buy less frequently but make more considered, higher value purchases.
- Why research, validation and trust now outweigh brand loyalty in many purchase decisions.

1.2. Modern Customer Journeys

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



- Where affiliate partnerships influence discovery, consideration and comparison rather than simply the final click.
- How different publisher types contribute at multiple stages across a single journey.
- Why looking beyond last-click performance is essential for understanding true value and driving sustainable growth.

The role of affiliate across discovery and decision making

Affiliate partnerships are uniquely aligned to longer, more research-led journeys. Content, editorial and buying guides shape early consideration, while comparison and incentive-led partners capture demand at the point of conversion. As the ecosystem matures, affiliates are increasingly driving new customer acquisition across every stage of the funnel.

Affiliate partners influence discovery, research, comparison and conversion across a single customer journey.

Content remains central to how consumers research products. Evergreen, SEO-led articles and product roundups continue to drive recommendations, while the rise of AI-driven search and generative engines is accelerating how consumers gather information. This makes content increasingly measurable and influential in decision-making.

Many shoppers now begin with AI-generated summaries, before cross-referencing multiple sources to validate their choice. Once the product decision is made, the next question becomes where to purchase.

At this stage, a range of affiliate publisher types influence the final

1.2. Modern Customer Journeys

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



outcome. Comparison services, editorial publishers, cashback platforms and voucher partners all play a role. In competitive retail environments, particularly where brands sit alongside multiple resellers - this final stage is often where the battle is won or lost.

Looking beyond last-click

Despite these complexities, many advertisers still rely on last-click attribution as a clear and consistent point of measurement. While this provides a clean way to assign value to the final interaction, it can limit visibility into the broader contribution of upper-funnel activity. As a result, establishing a more balanced view of “the value of the click” is critical to fully understanding and scaling affiliate performance across the entire journey.

Last-click shows who closed the sale, not who influenced the decision.

This is where deeper journey analysis becomes valuable. Within Webgains, our Customer Journey reporting focuses specifically on affiliate touchpoints. It allows advertisers to see how different publisher types interact before a conversion takes place.

For example, a brand may discover that editorial or comparison partners introduced the product earlier in the journey, while a cashback or voucher partner ultimately closed the sale. Understanding this sequence helps brands recognise the role each publisher plays.

Although commission is still paid on a last click basis, Smart Commissioning allows advertisers to optimise how incentives and investments are applied across the program.

1.2. Modern Customer Journeys

With Charlie Lynn, Head of Client Services | Webgains



Brands can adjust commission rates based on products, categories, customer types or basket values. This ensures publishers are rewarded for driving the outcomes that matter most, such as new customer acquisition, higher margin products or strategic inventory.

A collaborative journey, not just one touchpoint

Consumer buying behaviour continues to evolve - the modern customer journey is collaborative. Multiple publishers and channels contribute to a single conversion. Understanding these roles is essential when building a sustainable and scalable affiliate program.

By analysing affiliate touchpoints and applying smarter commission strategies, brands can ensure publishers are rewarded fairly while maintaining control over performance and growth.

**Lucky you! Here's
another checklist to
evaluate your program
and strategy around the
modern journey...**





CHARLIE'S CHECKLIST

Does your strategy suit the modern customer journey?

Discovery

- ✓ **Your brand shows up** in environments where discovery happens passively
- ✓ **You invest in relevance and context**, not just reach
- ✓ **Discovery activity is valued** even when it doesn't convert immediately

Validation & Consideration

- ✓ **You remain visible** while customers research, compare and hesitate
- ✓ **Proof points** (reviews, comparisons) appear before heavy incentives
- ✓ **Mid-funnel partners support** decision-making, not just traffic generation

Conversion & Timing

- ✓ **You accept** that conversion often happens later, not on first intent
- ✓ **Incentives are targeted and timely**, not blanket discounts
- ✓ **Messaging adapts to motivation** rather than repeating the same CTA

Post-Purchase & Momentum

- ✓ **Post-purchase** is treated as the start of the next journey, not the end
- ✓ **Offers or rewards are used** to capture first-party data
- ✓ **Repeat purchase**, referrals or re-engagement are actively encouraged

How does your funnel score?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



**NEXT UP?
WHAT THE
PUBLISHERS SAID**

MODERN CUSTOMER JOURNEYS

What the Publishers said...

 GENIE SHOPPING

"Today's purchase journey looks more like a zigzag, jumping, repeating and combining stages as shoppers research, compare, abandon and return."

 blue™

"Post purchase becomes the new top of the funnel. A good experience drives referrals, repeat buying, and higher lifetime value, which then fuels future discovery."

The best brands always run on brand coverage to stay mentally available, then use programmatic and retargeting to guide prospects through proof points and remove friction until the timing is right."

 gocertify

"Discover → browse → hesitate → look for relevance → convert. Winning brands trigger contextual, identity-based offers at intent moments, not blanket discounts at checkout."

 SOVENDUS

"Today's funnel is fragmented and compressed. Purchase decisions are often made faster, but reinforced repeatedly through validation points – reviews, incentives, peer signals, and perceived value. The mistake many brands make is over-investing."

1.3. REACHING SPECIFIC AUDIENCES

With Dom Doherty, Account Director | Webgains



From my perspective, reaching the right audience at the right moment is what separates an affiliate program that simply performs from one that genuinely transforms a brand's growth.

Within affiliate marketing, success often comes down to identifying a consumer need or "moment", then pairing that moment with the most effective mix of publisher types.

The most effective affiliate strategies connect the right audience with the right publisher at the right moment.

At Webgains our strategy first approach, supported by the Client Services team, focuses heavily on audience understanding, data driven insights and careful publisher selection. This allows us to build activity that is both targeted and scalable.

1. Start with the customer need or moment

Every effective affiliate tactic begins with a clear understanding of customer intent. In most cases this intent appears in one of four moments.

I want to solve a problem

For example, a homeowner needing a replacement appliance quickly.

I want to save money

Shoppers actively searching for voucher codes before checkout.

1.3. Reaching Specific Audiences

With Dom Doherty, Account Director | Webgains



I want to explore

Inspiration led browsing across sectors such as fashion, homeware or travel.

I want reassurance

Customers looking for reviews, recommendations or social proof.

Understanding the customer moment is the first step to building an effective strategy.

Identifying the specific moment helps define not only who the audience is but also the mindset they are in. Within the Webgains Knowledge Base we emphasise that advertisers should map their key conversion moments to the publisher mix. This ensures each stage of the journey is supported by the right affiliate partner.

2. Match consumer behaviour with the right publisher

Once customer intent is clear, the next step is aligning that behaviour with the publisher types most capable of reaching those audiences.

Voucher and cashback publishers

These partners work best during value driven moments. Their audiences are highly engaged and often ready to convert.

Our guidance at Webgains focuses on correct voucher setup, the use of unique codes and controlled exposure. This helps protect margin while still driving scale.

1.3. Reaching Specific Audiences

With Dom Doherty, Account Director | Webgains



Content and editorial publishers

Content partners are particularly effective for customers seeking information, reassurance or inspiration. They help support discovery and mid funnel influence while also allowing brands to reach niche audiences, such as sustainability focused sites or specialist hobby communities.

Influencer and social publishers

Influencer led publishers have become one of the most dynamic and fastest growing parts of the affiliate channel. Their strength lies in authentic storytelling and highly engaged communities.

This makes them an effective way to reach audiences who respond more strongly to personality driven recommendations than to traditional advertising.

The strongest affiliate programs combine multiple publisher types across the full customer journey.

CSS and comparison partners

Comparison partners capture high-intent demand. These audiences typically know what they want but are comparing factors such as price, delivery or product features.

When product feeds are optimised and kept up to date, CSS partners can capture this demand very efficiently while reducing the risk of non converting browsing activity.

1.3. Reaching Specific Audiences

With Dom Doherty, Account Director | Webgains



Tech partners via the tag

For brands seeking incremental growth without complex integration work, technology partners available through The Tag* provide valuable solutions.

These partners often respond to behavioural signals in real time, such as basket abandonment or purchase intent overlays. In many programs they have become an important tool for improving conversion rates.

Loyalty and membership platforms

These publishers attract audiences who respond well to exclusive offers and long term value. They are particularly effective for repeat purchase strategies and for reaching specific communities such as students, teachers or key workers.

A portrait of Dom Doherty, a man with short dark hair, wearing a red and white patterned sweater. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

Do you know which audiences you're reaching - and which moments you're missing?

*The Tag is Webgains' functionality that eliminates the need for advertisers to manually embed publisher-specific code into their websites. Instead, once the standard Webgains tracking script is in place, advertisers can activate tech publishers with just a few clicks.



DOM'S CHECKLIST

Are you set up to reach specific audiences?

Start With the Customer Moment

- ✓ You define audiences by **intent or need**, not just demographics
- ✓ You understand whether customers want to solve, save, or reassure
- ✓ You consider **customer mindset**, not just traffic source

Match Behaviour to the Right Publisher

- ✓ You use **content and editorial partners** for inspiration and research
- ✓ You deploy **voucher**, cashback or CSS partners for high-intent moments
- ✓ You use **influencers** or social publishers where trust and authority matter

Build a Publisher Mix That Reflects the Journey

- ✓ You unite **publisher types** across discovery, research, and conversion
- ✓ You avoid **relying on** a single tactic or partner type
- ✓ Your **publisher mix supports** both first-time and returning customers

Use Data to Refine and Personalise

- ✓ You analyse **performance** by customer type, not just by publisher
- ✓ You **tailor messaging** based on behaviour (e.g. AOV, repeat vs new)
- ✓ You use **data to refine** your mix over time, not just report on it

How does your audience strategy score?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



**NEXT UP?
WHAT THE
PUBLISHERS SAID**

REACHING SPECIFIC AUDIENCES

What the Publishers said...

 **Linkby.**

"Trust the experts. Be open to trialling different publishers based on the recommendations & trusting the content they produce to speak to their audience in the most effective way.

I'm sure you have a list of dream websites you would like to feature on, that we can of course pitch, but being open to the recommendations your Linkby rep makes is so important to getting you the best results."

 **gocertify**

"Use on-site verification to identify audiences like students, key workers or age groups, then activate those segments across CRM, paid media and loyalty."

**IMMEDIATE
MEDIA^{co}**

"Do your research on the audience and the content they engage with. Don't expect them to come to you."

 **blue™**

"Finding a specific audience is less about picking the perfect demographic and more about spotting the right signals, situations, and reasons to buy. The quickest way is to define what your best customers do, not what they look like on paper."

T H E PARTNERSHIPS

Understanding how Networks, Brands and Publishers
create value together in 2026



Georgina Samson

Client Services Director
Webgains

2.1. YOUR NETWORK PARTNERS

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



Affiliate marketing only works when three very different roles move in sync: the network, the brand, and the publisher. Each of us brings something unique. When we work together with clarity, trust and shared purpose, the whole system becomes stronger, smarter and far more effective.

Affiliate success happens when networks, brands and publishers move together with clarity and shared purpose.

Where we fit as the network: the connection point

As the network, we sit right at the centre of it all. Our job is to connect brands with thousands of publishers and make that relationship work smoothly every single day. As a Client Services team, we guide strategy, implementation and relationship management from start to finish.

We take on the operational heavy lifting so brands do not have to. This includes accurate tracking, automated invoicing and payments, compliance and governance, and clear reporting. For publishers we create a trusted environment where they know the brands are verified and that they will be paid correctly and on time. When both sides feel confident, performance follows.

2.1. Your Network Partners

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



Where the brand fits: the vision and the value

The brand brings the products, the offers and the commission structure: the core ingredients of the program. It relies on us for tracking, governance and strategic support, and on publishers to extend reach, influence customers and drive sales.

The brand sets the direction. Our role is to help translate that direction into practical action across the affiliate ecosystem.

Brands provide the value. Networks provide the structure. Publishers provide the reach.

Where the publisher fits: the audience and the influence

Publishers are the audience owners. They are the storytellers, the traffic drivers and the trust builders.

They take a brand's products and turn them into visibility, credibility and ultimately sales by offering:

- Audience reach
- Trust and influence
- Incremental demand

They are the engine of performance, and they thrive when the brand and network provide the tools, clarity and support they need.

Publishers turn products into visibility, credibility and sales.

2.1. Your Network Partners

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



What your network expects from you

A strong affiliate program is built on collaboration. When we work closely with brands, everything becomes easier. Performance improves, publishers stay engaged and the program scales with far less friction.

Here is what we need to make that happen.

Solid foundation - Accurate tracking setup, clear validation rules and program terms communicated upfront ensure attribution is correct and publisher payouts are reliable.

Aligned compliance - Shared clarity on brand guidelines, restricted terms, voucher usage and partner types allows us to apply standards consistently and protect the brand.

Joint strategic direction - The brand defines the strategy including goals, audiences, seasonality and growth priorities. We then bring it to life through affiliate plans, partner recommendations and daily implementation.

Connected communication - Responsive collaboration on approvals, assets and queries keeps activity moving smoothly.

Long term partnership - A shared commitment to testing, optimisation and publisher relationship building strengthens performance and supports sustainable growth.

The strongest affiliate programs are built on collaboration, clarity and long-term partnership.

2.1. Your Network Partners

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



What you should expect from your network

A network should give brands confidence. Confidence in the data, the partnerships, the strategy and the service. A network should remove friction, expand reach and actively contribute to growth, not simply act as a platform or administrative layer.

Here is what brands should expect from us.

High performance technology and reliable tracking - A modern and stable platform with accurate tracking, real time reporting and tools that support optimisation.

A service first approach - Hands on support, proactive communication and a team that feels like an extension of the brand rather than a distant vendor.

Strategic expertise and guidance - We should help shape and execute the brand's affiliate strategy, not simply host it. The brand defines the goals and we translate them into an actionable plan.

Operational efficiency - Smooth processes, automated invoicing, timely payments and clear reporting.

A trusted and well managed environment - A network should vet publishers, maintain quality standards, enforce compliance and ensure accurate payments.

2.2. YOUR PUBLISHER PARTNERS

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



What your publishers expect from you

Publishers choose where to invest their time, audience and influence. They have thousands of options. What makes them prioritise your brand is rarely accidental. It is shaped by how easy you are to work with and how competitive your program is.

Clear and consistent communication - Publishers value brands that communicate openly and respond quickly. When approvals, assets and questions are handled promptly, publishers can move quickly and maintain momentum.

Strong and competitive commercials - Publishers are naturally drawn to brands offering: competitive commission rates, attractive offers, clear value propositions, consistent promotional calendars.

Publishers prioritise brands that combine strong commercials with clear communication.

Reliable tracking and fair validation - Publishers need confidence that the sales they generate will be tracked accurately and validated fairly. Transparent rules and consistent validation build that trust.

Timely and predictable payments - Being paid on time is one of the biggest reasons publishers choose established networks.

A trusted and well managed environment - A shared commitment to testing, optimisation and publisher relationship building strengthens performance and supports sustainable growth.

2.2. Your Publisher Partners

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



What you should expect from your publishers

Publishers are one of the most powerful drivers of affiliate performance. However, brands should feel confident expecting high standards in return.

Quality content that represents the brand well - Publishers should create content that is accurate, relevant and aligned with the brand's values.

Brands should expect partners to present products clearly, maintain high editorial standards and keep content up to date.

Transparency in how they promote - Publishers should be open about where and how they promote brands, whether paid media is involved and how traffic is generated.

Timely updates and responsiveness - When campaigns are planned or booked, publishers should communicate proactively and ensure placements go live as agreed.

A commitment to performance - Performance is a shared responsibility. Publishers should optimise placements, test formats and share insights that help brands improve results.

The best publisher partnerships are built on transparency, quality and shared accountability.

2.2. Your Publisher Partners

With Georgina Samson, Client Services Director | Webgains



Bringing it all together

Affiliate marketing works best when networks, brands and publishers move in step with one another.

Each plays a different role. Real success happens when those roles connect.

When the network provides stability and expertise, the brand brings vision and value, and the publisher delivers reach and influence, the channel becomes more than a performance driver.

It becomes a genuine partnership that grows stronger, smarter and more effective over time.

Are you leveraging your publisher and network relationships enough? Find out on the next page.





GEORGINA'S CHECKLIST

Are you maximising the value of your partnerships?

Program Foundations

- ✓ **Tracking is implemented** thoroughly and regularly audited
- ✓ **Validation rules are clear**, fair, and consistently applied
- ✓ **Program terms are transparent** and easy for publishers to understand

Publisher Relationships

- ✓ **Key partners are actively managed**, not left on autopilot
- ✓ **Publishers understand** where they fit in the wider customer journey
- ✓ **Communication is proactive**, timely, and two-way

Commercial Attractiveness

- ✓ **Commission rates** are competitive within the category
- ✓ **Offers and incentives** are compelling and clearly positioned
- ✓ **Commercial structures reward** incremental value, not just last-click volume

Trust, Governance & Growth

- ✓ **Compliance rules** are applied consistently across partner types
- ✓ **Performance is reviewed** beyond last-click metrics
- ✓ **Learnings are used** to improve activity and inform future strategy

How does your affiliate program score in this area?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



NEXT UP?
PART 3 - THE
EVOLUTION

T H E EVOLUTION

How affiliate marketing is evolving and
how brands should prepare



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3.1. CHALLENGING AFFILIATE NORMS

With Mei Ng, Senior Account Manager | Webgains



Many affiliate programs are held back not by a lack of opportunity but by assumptions that have gone largely unchallenged.

Ideas such as “launch it and it will run itself”, “CPA alone is enough” or “more affiliates means more scale” are still widely accepted, even though they rarely reflect how the channel works today.

This chapter explores several common affiliate norms that can quietly limit performance.

The biggest barrier to affiliate growth is often outdated assumptions.

Launch it and it will run itself

Some programs are launched and then left with little follow up. However, affiliates do not promote a brand simply because tracking is active.

They compare offers, creatives, communication and how easy the brand is to work with. To engage the best partners, brands must provide clear briefs, updated assets, competitive terms and messaging that affiliates can easily use.

3.1. Challenging Affiliate Norms

With Mei Ng, Senior Account Manager | Webgains



Launch should be seen as the starting point, not the finish line. Brands should regularly review landing pages, product feeds and commission logic. They should also respond quickly when performance changes.

Launching an affiliate program is only the beginning. Growth requires ongoing management.

Successful programs evolve continuously, just like any other marketing channel.

Once partners are connected, nothing more is needed

Affiliates are real businesses with their own goals, costs and audiences. They do not all deliver performance in the same way. Some partners drive immediate conversions. Others build awareness, trust and interest earlier in the journey.

Both roles matter.

Brands should maintain regular communication with partners. Share campaign timelines, product launches, promotions and insights into what is converting well. Affiliates often have valuable insight into shopper behaviour and emerging trends.

When communication stops, brands quickly fall down a partner's priority list while competitors move ahead.

3.1. Challenging Affiliate Norms

With Mei Ng, Senior Account Manager | Webgains



CPA alone is enough

A performance model does not mean marketing without investment.

Behind every placement is real work. Publishers invest in audiences, content creation, SEO, tools and promotional activity. Some placements require additional fees because the publisher is committing time and resources to feature a brand prominently.

Even modest budgets can unlock valuable opportunities such as newsletter placements, editorial features or seasonal campaigns.

Affiliate is performance marketing, but it is not free marketing.

A well managed group of 40 to 60 active affiliates can easily outperform a much larger but inactive program.

More affiliates means more scale

Large affiliate lists can look impressive, but in reality a small group of partners usually drives the majority of performance.

Quality and relevance matter more than quantity.

Instead of focusing on volume, brands should prioritise strong relationships with high performing partners and recruit new affiliates who bring genuinely new audiences or traffic sources.

3.1. Challenging Affiliate Norms

With Mei Ng, Senior Account Manager | Webgains



One attribution report shows the full value

Customer journeys today are complex and involve multiple channels.

If brands only look at last-click reports, they undervalue partners who build awareness, trust and confidence earlier in the journey.

To understand true contribution, brands should look at additional indicators such as assisted conversions, new customer share and impact on average order value.

Last-click measures the finish line, not the full journey.

With a broader view, brands can design commission structures that reward real influence rather than simply the final interaction.



Do you know which audiences you're reaching - and which moments you're missing?



MEI'S CHECKLIST

Are you challenging enough affiliate norms?

Program Management

- ✓ **Your program** is actively managed after launch
- ✓ **Landing pages, product feeds** and assets are reviewed regularly
- ✓ **Commissions** & performance trends are monitored & optimised

Partner Relationships

- ✓ **Affiliates receive** regular updates on campaigns, launches and promos
- ✓ **You share** insights on what products or messages are converting well
- ✓ **Affiliates are encouraged** to share ideas, feedback and insights

Commercial Approach

- ✓ **You allocate budget** for premium placements or promotional opportunities
- ✓ **Publishers are** supported with relevant assets, exclusives or campaign collaboration
- ✓ **Partnership discussions** go beyond standard CPA-only arrangements

Measurement & Growth

- ✓ **Performance is reviewed** beyond last-click attribution
- ✓ **Assisted conversions** and new customer share are analysed regularly
- ✓ **Partner recruitment** focuses on quality and new audience reach, not just scale

How does your funnel score?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



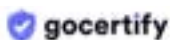
**NEXT UP?
WHAT THE
PUBLISHERS SAID**

CHALLENGING AFFILIATE NORMS

What the Publishers said...

 Linkby.

"Last Click Attribution - we should be looking at customer journeys and how affiliates are influencing sales at every point of the funnel - the actual way that customers shop, via multiple touchpoints."

 gocertify

"Sitewide discounts drive growth." They don't. They erode margin and loyalty. Targeted, verified rewards outperform broad discounting every time."

 SOVENDUS

"The idea that monetisation and customer experience are at odds needs to be challenged. When done poorly, that's true – but when done well, monetisation can enhance relevance, reward loyalty, and improve perceived value. The most progressive brands don't treat revenue generation and customer experience as competing priorities; they design models where each strengthens the other."

 GENIE SHOPPING

"Instead of blanket rejections, brands should consider more flexible policies around honouring commissions for public voucher use. An approach which rewards publishers fairly for their efforts, whilst respecting the consumer journey, is key to powering performance."



3.2. WHAT'S NEXT IN AFFILIATE

With Rohit Kokitkar, Senior Account Manager | Webgains

The affiliate channel is no longer a niche last-click tactic. It is becoming a full funnel growth channel that delivers measurable impact across awareness, consideration, conversion and retention.

Affiliate is evolving from a tactical channel into a strategic growth engine.

This shift is being driven by changes in technology, measurement and partnership models. Brands that adapt now will unlock significantly greater value from affiliate.

Technology: privacy first by design

Affiliate technology today goes far beyond simple tracking.

In a privacy focused environment shaped by GDPR and consent requirements, brands are investing in first party data strategies, server to server tracking and compliant attribution frameworks.

Reliable data gives brands the confidence to invest and scale.

Measurement: beyond last-click

Last-click attribution often fails to reflect real customer behaviour, particularly in high consideration sectors such as insurance, travel and retail. Forward thinking brands are experimenting with incrementality testing, marketing mix modelling and lifetime value measurement.

Brands that measure beyond last-click unlock the real strategic value of affiliate.

Partnerships: from transactions to strategy

The affiliate ecosystem now includes far more than cashback and voucher partners.

Content publishers, creators, comparison platforms, media buyers and brand partnerships all contribute across different stages of the journey.

Brands achieving the strongest results are building long term partnerships rather than one off activations.

The future of affiliate lies in strategic partnerships, not one off transactions.

Investment mindset: a strategic growth channel

Affiliate consistently delivers strong ROI, yet many brands still under invest compared with other channels.

In a landscape where paid media costs are rising, this represents a missed opportunity.

3.2. What's Next in Affiliate

With Rohit Kokitkar, Senior Account Manager | Webgains



What brands should do in 2026

To stay competitive, brands should:

- Invest in privacy safe technology
- Expand measurement beyond last-click
- Build deeper and more transparent partnerships
- Position affiliate internally as a strategic growth channel

Affiliate is no longer quietly evolving. It is becoming one of the most adaptable and accountable drivers of sustainable growth.

Affiliate is becoming one of the most adaptable and accountable drivers of long term growth.

Try my checklist on the next page to measure how well set you are for tomorrow's affiliate channel.





ROHIT'S CHECKLIST

Is your affiliate strategy future-proofed?

Technology: Privacy-First by Design

- ✓ **You treat** affiliate technology as more than just tracking
- ✓ **Your strategy includes first-party data**, tracking and compliant attribution
- ✓ **You trust the data** enough to confidently invest and scale

Measurement: Beyond Last-Click

- ✓ **You recognise** that last-click doesn't reflect real customer behaviour
- ✓ **You explore incrementality**, lifetime value or marketing mix modelling
- ✓ **You assess affiliate value** across awareness, consideration and conversion

Partnerships: From Transactions to Strategy

- ✓ **Your affiliate mix extends** beyond cashback and voucher partners
- ✓ **You work with publishers** who influence different stages of the journey
- ✓ **You prioritise long-term partnerships** over one-off activations

A Strategic Growth Channel

- ✓ **You position affiliate internally** as a strategic growth channel
- ✓ **You invest in affiliate relative to its ROI**, not historical habits
- ✓ **You see rising paid media costs** as a reason to lean into affiliate

How ready is your funnel?

0-4 = *Keep building*



5-8 = *Getting there*



9-12 = *Sky's the limit!*



**NEXT UP?
WHAT THE
PUBLISHERS SAID**

WHAT'S NEXT IN AFFILIATE

What the Publishers said...



"In 2026, AI is no longer an emerging trend in ecommerce advertising, it is the operating system. Decisions around visibility, scale and efficiency are increasingly made by algorithms.

In this AI-driven environment, brands compete primarily on the quality of the signals they provide. For ecommerce advertisers working with CSS partners, the most important of those signals comes from one place: the product feed."



"Our prediction: the brands that will excel at getting their products discovered in agentic commerce are the brands that treat their feeds as a strategic asset."



"First-party data maturity. Personalisation driven by verified identity (not cookies). Offers that adapt in real time based on who the shopper is, not just what they clicked. "



"We have noticed brands are more focused on brand awareness pieces alongside sales driven content. We can see this trending across all brands we work on."



ABOUT WEBGAINS

Webgains is the Service-First affiliate network, delivering outstanding support, strategic expertise, and winning affiliate partnerships to thousands of leading retail brands worldwide.

Webgains combines seamless experience with a wide range of powerful tools and automation for advertisers and publishers, as well as robust GDPR complaint tracking, to maximise every user's output.



Ready to put this
Playbook into action?

GET STARTED

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