



# PLAYTIME

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# IS OVER:

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Google Ends the Privacy Sandbox  
Experiment

# Executive Summary

Google has reversed its decision to completely eliminate third-party cookies in Chrome, a significant shift from its earlier stance. Initially, Google planned to phase out these cookies by 2022, which was later postponed to 2023 and then to 2024. However, the latest update reveals that Google will continue to support third-party cookies while introducing new user-facing privacy features and technologies aimed at reducing cross-site tracking.

Having faced much scrutiny from regulators, industry bodies, and various advertising technology companies, it appears that the “Privacy Sandbox” initiatives will fail to make it out of the playground into the real world. Instead of being the standard, they will now become optional – and most importantly, the responsibility of the user.

We asked our leading data and technology experts across the globe for their opinions on this change in tactic and what it could mean for our industry. Here’s what they had to say...

# DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK. REALLY.



**MICHAEL MCVEIGH**

*SVP, CRM & Martech, Assembly, North America*

Upon hearing the news, I interviewed a third-party cookie on my Chrome browser. It said, and I quote, “Don’t call it a comeback, I been here for years.”\*

The upshot is that now we can all shrug and go back to the same course we’ve been on, which is using third-party cookies while we permissibly can and honing techniques to succeed in targeting and measurement in the wide range of touch points where and when we cannot.

Third-party cookies will not make a raging comeback. We continue to have a patchwork quilt Martech environment where the signals that are both present and absent require a savvy, modeled approach to understanding the customer journey along paid, earned, and owned touchpoints. Also, nothing has changed in terms of customer preferences on privacy or with interpretations of existing regulations. We must continue strict adherence to the permissions of customers while acting accountably within the regulatory boundaries set by regional governments.

When the Y2K apocalypse did not materialize, the industry did not revert to coding ambiguous date patterns in software. Now that the cookie apocalypse is a similar dud, we will not revert to third-party cookie reliance. We will let cookies have their limited place in the ecosystem and appreciate the marginal utility they offer. However, third-party cookies will not outgrow their nominal role as mere sub-particles in the wider universe of targeting and measurement.

\*Incidentally, that third-party cookie on my browser was set by the domain: <https://store.lcoolj.com/>

# SAME OLD, SAME OLD...



**PEDRO MONA**

*Head of Consultancy, Assembly Europe*

It's not really a surprise that Google backtracked on their plan to get rid of third-party cookies. After four years of getting ready for the death of cookies, what has really changed?

## **Not much.**

Apple had already killed cookies from its ecosystem (and so did most web browsers).

In the vast majority of countries, privacy legislation has been in place for a long time, and publishers and advertisers have implemented consent management platforms to manage users' preferences regarding privacy.

Cookies are just one of the few mechanisms used for tracking. Google's decision ultimately changes nothing in the Martech ecosystem.

The limitations and opportunities we had yesterday are the same as we will have for the foreseeable future: a fragmented digital ecosystem, some cookies, some IDs, and some walled gardens.

This announcement changes nothing from what we have been doing for 4 years now:

- + Consent for tracking became the norm (in most countries)
- + Measurement has evolved to provide better analysis of the big picture and real contribution of each publisher/walled garden

Let's not overthink this. Cookies are still in and, just like the real ones they are good sometimes, but not the only thing you eat.

# WELL PLAYED ADTECH, WELL PLAYED!



**FEMI TAIWO**

*Head of Google Practice, Assembly Europe*

Google has decided to scrap its deprecation of third-party cookies—surprised (it's come so quickly after the last delay) but not shocked (it's eventually happened).

While this seems like a victory for the industry, there is a warning here that we should all heed. This U-turn has come from the consistent pressure applied by the UK's Competition Markets Authority (CMA) and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), who are responsible for maintaining a competitive market and upholding information rights in the public interest, respectively.

The unspoken promise of Google's attempts to do away with third-party cookies has been the opportunity for us to build a new (and different) type of advertising model for the Internet. With the dramatically reduced effectiveness of cookie-based tracking, increased user awareness of privacy and data (mis)management, and global legislation that has strengthened the walled gardens of Big Tech, this was an opportunity to reset how we advertised—or at least what kinds of data points we use to create memorable, effective, and sales-driving advertising. But alas, no, it is not to be. At least not today.

While the ICO is “disappointed that Google has changed its plans,” it should not be a surprise. The EU was able to learn from the misaligned intent of the GDPR and consequently drafted the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to help overcome the issues its legislation created. However, the UK authorities boxed Google into a corner where the only measure of success for the Privacy Sandbox initiatives was parity with the status quo—that's a recipe for failure.

Today, many adtech players will breathe a huge sigh of relief. Let's ignore the five years of wasted personnel hours, the billions of wasted investments, and the missed opportunity to reinvent our industry. We were gifted the chance to show we were responsible enough to continue with our self-governance model. I fear we've squandered it.

Let's not be surprised if the next 24-36 months create the case for industry regulation and we look back longingly at what could have been if we had not used the CMA and ICO's rules against them.

**Well played, AdTech, well played! You've won.**

# NAVIGATING THE PUZZLE OF ADTECH EVOLUTION



**MOYOSORE FAGUNWA**

*Head of Data & Analytics, Assembly MENA*

As Google indefinitely stalls the deprecation of third-party cookies, the adtech and martech sectors find themselves with a mixed blessing. While we can continue to leverage existing technologies, ensuring stability and continuity in our campaigns, this pause is not a signal to relax. Instead, it highlights the pressing need to innovate and refine our approaches, especially in terms of privacy-respecting advertising solutions.

The global landscape is fragmenting, with government policies (outside MENA) and the rise of “data continents”—where big tech companies guard their data ecosystems—complicating our efforts. We’re tasked with solving a 1,500-piece jigsaw puzzle, facing not only missing pieces but some that no longer fit.

Yet, these challenges should not diminish our resolve to innovate. By empowering users with robust consent mechanisms and adopting ethical data usage frameworks, we can effectively tick the “privacy” box. Integrating a combination of first-party data solutions, contextual advertising, and modeled measurement strategies will foster a healthier, more resilient advertising ecosystem where both the industry and its consumers can thrive.

# PROGRESS AT THE END OF THE DAY



**JACK POLITIS**

*Vice President, Programmatic, Assembly North America*

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From my perspective, the choice by Chrome to no longer deprecate is certainly, on the surface, bewildering and a bit reminiscent of the boy who cried wolf (though I wouldn't quote me on that part!). But it doesn't fundamentally change the value of what Google has, on the whole, been trying to do with Sandbox and other initiatives around higher fidelity and more privacy-safe approaches to targeting and attribution than what the third-party cookie provides.

Even with the walk back, Chrome is ostensibly going to make it easier for users to opt out of cookies, and this is a good reminder that even prior to the question of cookies in Chrome, close to 40% of the Internet was unaddressable using a third party cookie approach.

The first-party and data-led approaches that Google and the industry, in parallel, have been developing still make sense to run with full steam, as they continue to represent an ultimately clearer and more long-term durable way of building campaigns to effectively reach our clients' audiences. We're all the stronger as an industry for being motivated in this direction these last few years by the looming specter of a Chrome third-party deprecation, even if it isn't coming to pass.

# A SURPRISING ENDING. A NEW BEGINNING FOR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS



**VERON DAI**

*Regional Data & Consultancy Director, Assembly APAC*

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After years of preparation, this is certainly a surprising ending. It might look like a step backward, but the changes triggered in the industry will not revert, and people's strengthened awareness of privacy will not go back either.

The news of deprecation generally pushed the industry in the right direction by putting user privacy at the center of consideration and pushing companies and organizations to adopt a user-privacy-centric approach. The decisions are given back to individual users regarding their own cookie policy, which, like it or not, has already reshaped our ways of working to a large extent.

In APAC, the situation varies country by country, depending on the legislation, local digital landscape, users' attitudes towards private data, and adtech tools. In some markets like China, although cookies are still in use, businesses heavily leverage mobile data for targeting. Rapid technological adoption leads to alternative, innovative tracking solutions as well, which are worth referencing.

Our stance should remain the same: user privacy should remain a priority. We need to continue to introduce more innovations to not only preserve privacy, but also ensure operations are future-proof.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR BRANDS

## WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Fortunately, not much is changing. The Internet has been in various levels of brokenness for a few years, and cookie-based targeting has not been as effective as it used to be. This change from Google is not a call to go back to the way things were but rather to embrace the move towards a privacy-first approach to marketing.

While the consumer will be given the option to choose the level of privacy they want for their browsing experience, brands should take the lead and set the example by promoting and using privacy-sensitive marketing initiatives.

If you've been following our recommendations over the past few years, then you're in great shape—you will have moved towards first-party datasets, be it your CRM, a Customer Data Platform (CDP), or email lists.

If you haven't, it's not too late to make the change. We'd love to help you navigate this pivot, whether it's choosing the right platform(s), crafting the appropriate data strategy, or adapting your media activation strategy.



# + CONTACT US

For a no obligation, free consultation.

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