CallRail

The attribution black hole

A field guide for agencies running Performance Max

According to Google, your client's Performance Max campaign just had its best month ever. Conversions are up, the dashboard looks clean, and you're about to write the performance summary — then they ask why the revenue didn't move.

That's the attribution black hole. It opens the moment agencies run PMAX without feeding clean call conversion data back to Google. Unlike manual campaigns, PMAX doesn't take bid adjustments or audience overrides. The conversion feed is your bidding strategy — the only input Google uses to decide who to target, what to pay, and where to push budget.

Reports capture what happened inside the platform. What they miss is what happened *after* the click, when the customer called. That signal never reaches Google. So PMAX keeps training on an incomplete picture, finding more of whatever converted, including calls that were never real leads in the first place.

Here's what's happening, why it matters for your agency, and how to close it.

What Performance Max is actually learning from your calls

Performance Max doesn't work like a manual campaign. You define a conversion and the inputs. Google studies the patterns of everyone who triggered it — keyword, device, time of day, audience signals — and finds more people who match that profile.

According to Google, more than

80% of advertisers are already on automated bidding.

Smart Bidding is almost certainly running your clients' accounts right now. This is effective when the conversion data is clean. The problem is what it's learning from.

Your client's conversion data almost certainly includes:

- Spam calls and robodialers
- Wrong numbers
- Existing customers calling for billing or support
- Out-of-area inquiries with no purchase intent

The algorithm isn't making value judgments about what counts as a real lead. It's learning from all of them equally. There's no flag for junk in Smart Bidding's engine — it just finds more of whatever you told it to count.

Where call data disappears in PMAX

Most agencies have solid visibility into what happened before a call — keyword, campaign, device, ad group. The gap is what happened after. For call-dependent clients like home service contractors, healthcare practices, and legal firms, calls are where revenue actually closes. But unless those calls are tracked, qualified, and fed back to Google as signals, Smart Bidding is working with thin data at best and no call data at worst.

60% of customers prefer to call when they're ready to book, yet agencies face a ~28% missed call rate at the client level. For the typical agency client, that's 179 missed calls per month that never reach conversion data, adding up to an average of $126,360 in lost annual revenue. The ones that do make it in aren't necessarily real leads. Most setups count any call over a set duration as a conversion. That puts every low-quality call in the same bucket as your client's best leads.

Google doesn't see a problem here. It's doing exactly what you told it to do. That's the black hole: the algorithm is running well on the wrong instructions.

Audit your clients' PMAX accounts this week

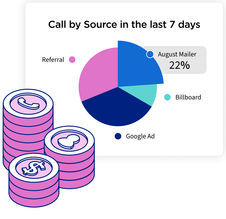
- **Filter call conversions by duration**
  Open your PMAX conversion settings and look for call conversions under 30 seconds. If any are being counted, that's junk — robodialers, wrong numbers, one-ring hangups. That's been training Google.
- **Confirm call data is actually flowing back to Google**
  Not every PMAX account has call conversion data connected. If nothing is flowing back, Smart Bidding is running on clicks and form fills only — no call signal at all.
- **Check whether existing-customer callbacks are excluded**
  Return calls from current clients skew your data. If they're counted as conversions, Google learns to find more of your existing customers, not new leads.
- **Review which conversion actions PMAX is learning from**
  Go to campaign settings and check the listed conversion goals. If calls are included without qualification rules, every call, regardless of quality, is shaping the campaign.

What the attribution gap costs your agency

Attribution gaps stay invisible until something forces the comparison. That usually happens when the client's internal team sees numbers that don't match what the agency is reporting — the ops lead's GA reports, the finance contact's revenue data. When Google Ads says one thing and the client's own analytics say another, attribution stops being a technical issue and becomes a relationship one.

Attribution clarity now ranks among the top drivers of agency client retention. Your client isn't wrong to push back. Budget allocation, bidding strategy, audience targeting — every decision that shaped their campaign came from call data that was never clean.

This compounds over time. The longer PMAX trains on mixed call data, the more confidently it bids toward the wrong audience. The gap between platform reporting and real client results keeps growing. Start cleaning it up before the client review, not after.



MILIA MARKETING
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Milia Marketing solved this before it cost them a client

The Cleveland-based agency rebuilt its entire client strategy around call data — and the returns were immediate. "When you show a client they missed five calls this month, and their average kitchen remodel is $10,000, you are shining a spotlight on a potential $50,000 in lost revenue," said founder Anthony Milia.

It changed how they kept clients too. "Our client retention rate would be a fraction of what it is without CallRail."

How to stop feeding Google the wrong calls

The fix is a layer between the phone call and Google's ad engine — one that filters which call outcomes count as conversions before that signal goes back to Google. The goal is simple. Send only what you actually want more of.

CallRail's Call Tracking connects call data to your clients' Google Ads accounts.

Here's how it works.

01

CallRail blocks the junk before it reaches Google

It filters out spam and low-value calls before they can reach conversion data. Robodialer detection identifies junk calls in the first few seconds of a ring, before they're answered and before they can shape what Google learns. Every spam call that reaches your conversion data is teaching Google the wrong lesson — keeping those calls out keeps your signals clean.

02

Voice Assist qualifies what gets through

Voice Assist answers every call, 24/7. It captures intent through intake questions, scores each lead against your ideal customer profile, and pushes qualified outcomes back to Google Ads as conversion signals. Instead of every call counting as a conversion, you're feeding Google signals based on real lead quality — not just call duration.

03

The Google Ads integration teaches Google to find better leads

With clean signals flowing through the Google Ads integration, Smart Bidding shifts toward your clients' actual best leads rather than a blended average. Return on ad spend (ROAS) improves, junk lead volume drops, and reporting becomes something you can defend. When a client asks why their best campaign month didn't produce the revenue to match, you have a clear answer and a plan that holds up the next time they ask.

Pro tip on conversion volume.
According to Google's own Smart Bidding guidance, the algorithm needs roughly 30 qualified conversions per month to learn effectively. If a client's call volume is lower, start with a looser threshold — calls over 90 seconds, for example — and build toward full qualification as volume grows.

Train PMAX on the leads that actually matter

Want to see what your clients' PMAX campaigns look like when Google is learning from real leads?

Try CallRail free for 14 days