The Future of Digital Analytics:

Google's New Page Experience Update, GA4, and More

Phase2

There's a seismic shift happening in the digital marketplace, which means now is the time to be vigilant and **prepare your website for the future of digital analytics.**

Modern analytic technologies supported by tech giants like Google, are pressing forward with an emphasis on the human-centered experience, new data privacy regulations, and new data-tracking protocols to provide more transparency for the consumer.

Marketers, SEOs, advertisers, and web managers, we know you've got a lot going on as it is and it's not always easy to distinguish which new tool or tactic is a leaf in the wind or here to stay long term. To stay competitive in a rapidly evolving digital marketplace, we can help you filter out the noise, place bets on the latest technology that we believe will stick around for the foreseeable future, and stretch your return on investments.

To help prioritize your efforts in the coming months, we've curated four game-changers to get ahead of in 2022 to ensure you're taking advantage of the next generation of digital analytics:

1. **Start Tracking Google's New Page Experience Search Signals, Specifically Core Web Vitals**

2. **Deploy GA4 Alongside Your Existing Universal Analytics Properties** (ASAP)

3. **Leverage the Full Suite of Google's Data Analytics Products**

4. **Shift Your Tracking Mindset to Privacy-First**

1 Start Tracking Google's Page Experience Search Signals, Specifically Core Web Vitals

As of May 2022, **Google dominates 88% of the U.S. search engine market share**, so if you hope to win against your competitors in organic search channels, you really need to learn to play by Google's rules.

Google's **new page experience** update is live as of June 2021. This means if you're aiming to score preferential positioning in Google's Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs), you will need to optimize your site for these latest search signals.

With this update, Google will now reward sites that provide a good on-page experience for their users, not just those that contain the most authoritative content. In other words, **the experience of the page is just as important as the content itself**.

The new **page experience measurements** report in Google Search Console (GSC) now includes five key user experience (UX) measurements to start tracking, including:

1. Core Web Vitals — Measures a page's loading speed, interactivity, and visual stability performance

2. Mobile Usability — Measures how mobile-friendly the page is

3. Security Issues — Measures how safe the page is for users to browse

4. HTTPS — Measures how secure the site's connection is

5. Ad Experience — Measures how accessible the content is to the user without interruption from interstitial (e.g. pop-up) ads

Start Tracking Google's New Page Experience Search Signals, Specifically Core Web Vitals

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Mobile usability, security issues, HTTPS, and ad experience were all existing search signals. However, **the search signal that yo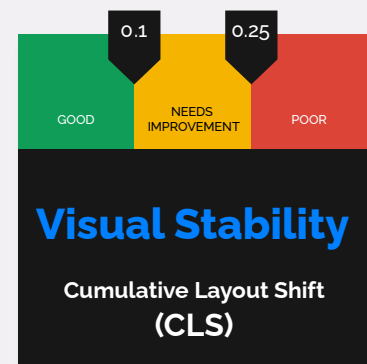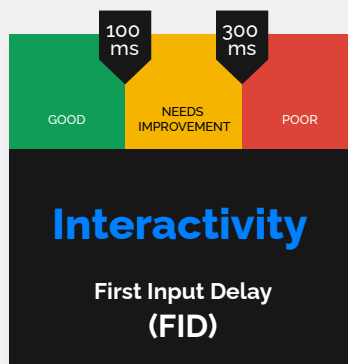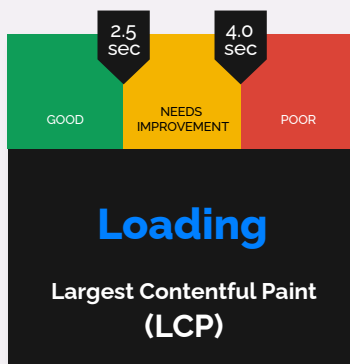u really need to be paying attention to is Core Web Vitals**. Core Web Vitals are brand new, so tracking them requires some new analytics configuration.

Every site owner should keep track of Core Web Vitals performance across all web pages because it will impact your site's visibility and page

rankings on Google Search. As of June 2021, Google rewards sites with optimal Core Web Vital scores.

The Core Web Vitals update includes a set of three user experience metrics related to a page's **loading speed (LCP), user responsiveness (FID), and visual stability (CLS)**.

2.5 sec	4.0 sec
GOOD	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	POOR

Loading

Largest Contentful Paint (LCP)

100 ms	300 ms
GOOD	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	POOR

Interactivity

First Input Delay (FID)

0.1	0.25
GOOD	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	POOR

Visual Stability

Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)

1 **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP):** This measures the loading performance of your page, specifically **the time it takes to load the largest image or text block in the viewport.** To provide a good user experience, LCP should optimally be below 2.5 seconds of when the page first starts loading.

2 **First Input Delay (FID):** This measures the interactivity and responsiveness of your page, specifically **the time it takes for the browser to be ready to react to a user interaction on the page, such as a click or tap.**

3 **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS):** This measures the visual stability of your page, specifically **the extent of any unexpected shifts that occur in the layout of your content as a user scrolls**. To provide a good user experience, pages should maintain a CLS score of 0.1. or less.

Start Tracking Google's New Page Experience Search Signals, Specifically Core Web Vitals

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Collectively, these Core Web Vitals measurements influence a user's perception of your page experience and assures them that your website is useful.

GSC's native report does a great job at aggregating the overall Core Web Vitals (CWV) performance across your entire site. However, we found it difficult to manage and analyze CWV performance at the page-level without fragmented exporting.

Additionally, GSC will only pull a sample list of similar page URLs that are impacted by low scores, which means determining which specific pages require a developer's attention can be a guessing game.

To capture page-level CWV metrics, we recommend installing page-level event tracking via Google Tag Manager, so you can better analyze these CWV metrics in Google Analytics. **Simo Ahava released a Core Web Vitals template for Google Tag Manage**r that makes it incredibly easy to install tracking for these measurements across all pages on your site.

Once page-level tracking is in place, you can then benefit from conducting a per-page analysis in Google Analytics. Or better yet, a streamlined Google Data Studio report can tell you exactly which pages are trouble makers, so you can pass those URLs off to your site developers to resolve and optimize.

Phase2 is actively testing a few new ways to report these Core Web Vitals measurements, so if you find yourself lost and unsure where to start, connect with our **Data and Insights** team for more advice on best practices.

As you get started, **here are some other recommended tools** that can help you measure and understand your site's Core Web Vitals performance.

Deploy GA4 Alongside Your Existing Universal Analytics Properties

There's a brand new version of Google Analytics, which every web manager needs to deploy immediately.

The previous version of Google Analytics, known as Universal Analytics (UA) or GA3, is on its way out the door, **which means the future of measurement lies with the next generation of Google Analytics 4, or GA4** — a web and app system of analytics.

That being said, if you have an existing UA property in Google Analytics, do not jump ship quite yet! So please, for the sake of all things good and green on this earth, **do not delete your existing UA properties!** Your existing UA properties will help with year-over-year analysis and reporting, as GA4 continues to roll out more feature updates and enhancements.

Instead, we highly recommend deploying a dual setup that runs UA and GA4 in parallel, which allows you to start collecting baseline data in GA4 while retaining your analytics data configuration in UA. Even if you're not ready to start leveraging GA4, we recommend deploying a GA4 property for your web and mobile app data streams sooner than later, since data is not retroactive and will only start collecting at the point of creation. Two years from now, you may want today's data in your GA4 properties, so get them deployed as soon as possible!

GA4 is primarily useful for things like retroactive segmentation, ad hoc funnel analysis, and lots of other event-driven analysis. However, there's quite a bit of leg work you need to do before it can be useful in mining meaningful business insights.

The biggest change in GA4 is that siloed scoping is gone. Traditionally, scope is how Google Analytics collects and formats the data it receives from your website. UA properties leveraged a users-, sessions-, hit-, and product-based measurement model, which was complex and wonky for data analysts.

However, **GA4 now uses an events-based measurement model**, where everything, including pageviews, is now considered an event, which eliminates the scoping limitations from UA and allows you to conduct a much more flexible analysis of your analytics properties.

Deploy GA4 Alongside Your Existing Universal Analytics Properties

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There are four categories of events that can be sent to Google Analytics, including:

1. Automatically collected events

These are events triggered by basic user interactions on your website or app. As long as you're using the global site tag (gtag.js), there's no additional configuration necessary here.

2. Enhanced measurement events

These are additional measurement events built into the GA4 interface that you can choose to toggle on or off. No additional code is required.

3. Recommended events

These are common measurement event scenarios deployed by most business verticals that require additional context to be useful, so configuration is necessary.

4. Custom events

As the name suggests, these unique events will require the greatest amount of customization. They are not automatically collected and require the use of Google Tag Manager to configure.

While the automatically collected events and enhanced measurements are enough to cover the basic data points necessary for analysis, you'll need to create a more personalized **GA4 solutions design and tag implementation plan** if you want to get the most out of your investment.

Leverage the Full Suite of Google's Data Analytics Products

With the new release of Google Analytics 4, Google is shifting the way marketing analysts view and orchestrate their use of **Google Cloud Computing products**, including **BigQuery** and the **Google Marketing Platform**,

As you think about your data infrastructure, you'll need to start mapping how data flows into your reports. We also recommend you create a strategic data management plan, like a **digital measurement model**, to identify gaps in your existing martech stack and opportunities to ensure you're tracking the most

important key performance indicators (KPIs) for your business. Additionally, you'll want to start leveraging more of **Google's Data Analytics products**.

Historically, Google Analytics was seen as the all-in-one tool used for data collection, analysis, and reporting. However, Google Analytics is returning to its roots to simplify its product and integrate with other, more advanced Google products, which are designed to augment the way marketers analyze their customer data.

If your business primarily uses Google products, **we recommend these tools as the core of your analytics tech stack**:

| 1. | Google Tag Manager (GTM) | GTM makes it easier to manage event tracking on your site, without the need of a developer. As a best practice, every site manager should deploy their Google Analytics property tracking code and custom event tracking via GTM. This product serves as the foundation for your website analytics infrastructure and requires technical know-how to implement. |

| 2. | Google Analytics 4 (GA4) | GA4 tracks and reports your web or app traffic to better understand your customer journey. This is where you should actually be conducting your business intelligence analysis via ad hoc segmentation to answer specific activity-based or user behavior questions. Those using the previous version of Google Analytics, known as Universal Analytics (UA) or GA3, should aim to **migrate to Google Analytics 4** as soon as possible since Google will sunset all UA properties in 2023. |

Leverage the Full Suite of Google's Data Analytics Products

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3. **Google BigQuery**	BigQuery is a cloud-based data warehouse that allows you to run SQL-like queries on raw data sets from data collection tools, like GA4. One of the many new perks of deploying a GA4 property is that you benefit from a license-free export to BigQuery. In short, you can take a deeper dive into your data sets with BigQuery and run filtered analysis for better, more advanced insights.

4. **Google Data Studio (GDS)**	GDS is a free, cloud-based dashboarding software that allows you to easily create custom, user-friendly data visualizations and reports. If you're already using GA4, you may have noticed that "Views" are no longer present in the Google Analytics interface. Google intentionally removed Views from GA4, because Google wants analysts to run their filtered reports in a dedicated data visualization tool, like GDS. GDS comes equipped with numerous data connectors, making it easy to integrate and consolidate your data sources into one dashboarding platform, to create a single source of truth for key stakeholders who need to draw actionable insights from this data.

The biggest takeaway here is that **Google no longer wants you to rely solely on Google Analytics for your data collection, analysis, and reporting needs**. As you may have guessed, Google wants everyone to take full advantage of their growing capabilities and use a combination of Google products, including GA4, GTM, and GDS. This strategy will give you the most flexibility in your data workflow and will set you up for success as you scale your digital analytics operations.

The good news here is that all of these products are entirely free to use; however, they do require a fair bit of technical acumen to optimally configure them to scale with your business. If you do not have a dedicated, in-house team to help you architect your data infrastructure, the Phase2 team can help set you up for success.

4 Shift Your Tracking Mindset to Privacy-First

The future of digital analytics will be privacy-first. Part of delivering a human-centered experience is caring for a user's data privacy, which entails the proper handling (collection, sharing, and use) of their data.

Gone are the days where marketers and advertisers can freely benefit from consumer data without permission. Consumers are becoming more aware of the marketing and advertising tactics that serve up their digital content online via search engines, websites, social media, and other online channels. This heightened awareness is leading to more public concern and demand for safeguards.

Naturally, people are worried about their privacy and how their data is being used to target them. As a result, more data regulation and standardization is becoming routine in the tools and technology we, as content publishers and marketers, depend on today.

We recommend all site owners and advertisers take a privacy-first approach to your data collection and usage to build trust and strong relationships with your consumers. This will set you up for success as legislatures release new data privacy regulations and big tech companies overhaul their tracking protocols to provide more transparency for consumers.

As a rule of thumb, all websites should be asking site visitors for cookie consent while providing a detailed and transparent privacy policy page to meet data privacy standards and best practices. You'll likely need to employ a consent management platform (CMP), like **OneTrust**, as part of your tech stack to help you manage this effort.

Minimally, you should familiarize yourself with some of the common data privacy laws in force today and act in accordance with any laws regulating your marketplace. For instance, the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** impacts businesses operating in the EU market and multiple state-based laws impact businesses operating in the U.S. market:

- **California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA)**

- **Virginia Consumer Data Protection Act (VCDPA)**

- **Colorado Privacy Act (CPA)**

- **Utah Consumer Privacy Act (UCPA)**

The future of measurement will likely be determined by data privacy laws and regulations. Additionally, we expect new standards and best practices to be introduced by other legislators or large technology companies in the coming months.

For instance, in GA4, **data privacy controls** are now activated by default and are no longer optional for website managers to toggle on or off. In response to the growing pressure and public scrutiny in the media, Google launched its own **Privacy Sandbox** back in 2020 to help build new internet privacy standards for web and app tracking. Companies like Google are having to shift their tracking mindset to privacy-first and so should you.

Data privacy will undoubtedly impact how you track consumer data in the future, so we recommend you stay abreast of the latest privacy developments and get a data governance plan in place sooner than later.
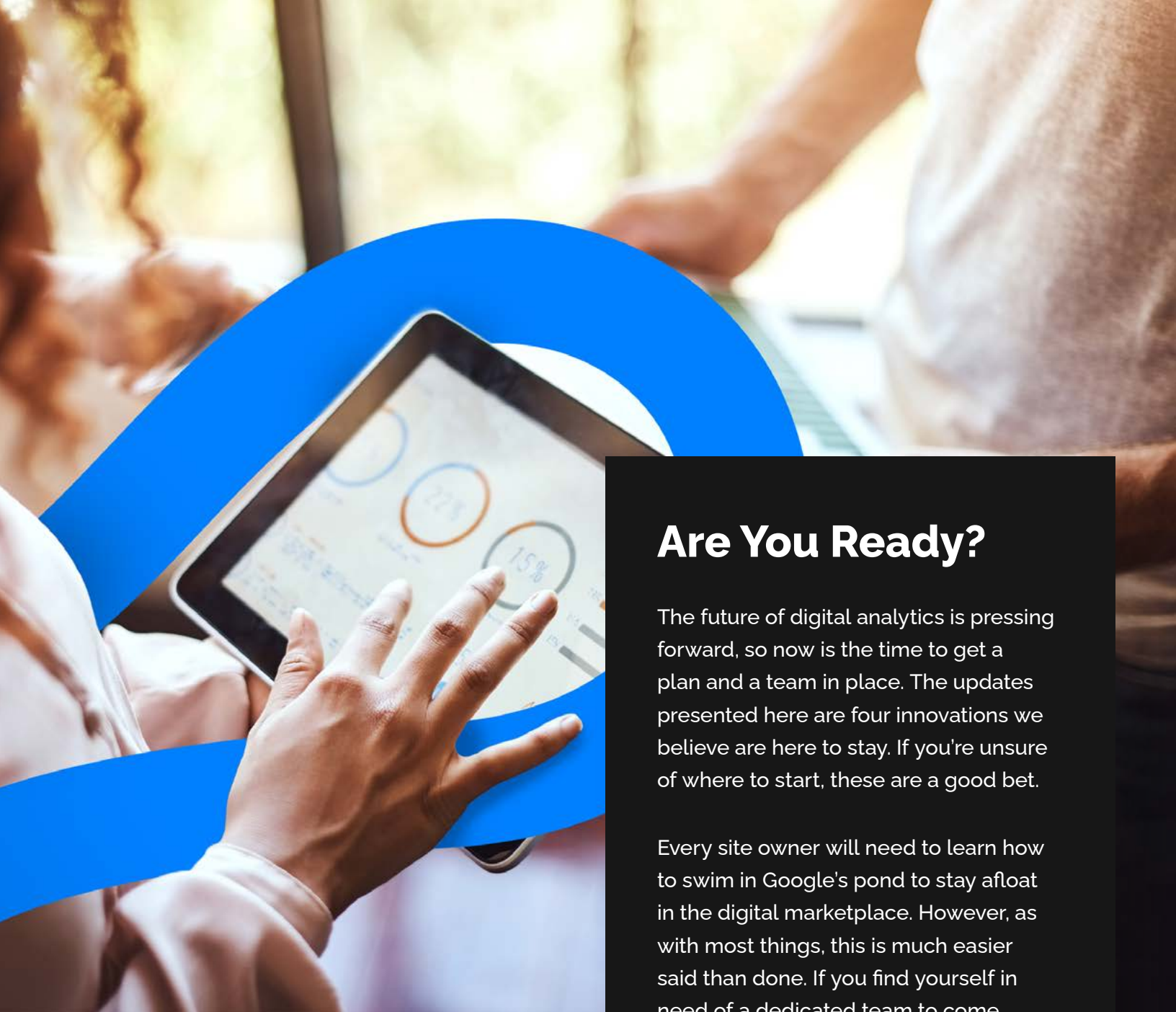
Are You Ready?

The future of digital analytics is pressing forward, so now is the time to get a plan and a team in place. The updates presented here are four innovations we believe are here to stay. If you're unsure of where to start, these are a good bet.

Every site owner will need to learn how to swim in Google's pond to stay afloat in the digital marketplace. However, as with most things, this is much easier said than done. If you find yourself in need of a dedicated team to come alongside you and your team, consider partnering with the **Customer Data and Insights experts** at Phase2.

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