

How Long Do Lifetime Commissions Really Last?

By Clay Mabbitt

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Once you refer a customer to an affiliate program that offers lifetime commissions, you can expect payment every time that customer buys anything from the program at any point in the future. At least, that's what happens in theory. The reality isn't always as profitable.

An important consideration in examining affiliate programs that claim to pay lifetime commissions is how referrals are tracked. The simplest (and least dependable) method uses cookies, small pieces of information that your web browser saves on your computer about web sites you've visited. Cookies can have an expiration date attached to them, and affiliate programs using the cookie method will often either set the expiration date far into the future (say 10 years?) or set no expiration date at all, which is where the claim of lifetime commissions enters.

There are several problems with cookies. What if your customer places an order from their computer at work instead of home where your cookie is located? The answer, of course, is that you will not receive any commission. You can also expect to receive no commissions if your customer switches from Internet Explorer to Netscape or buys a new computer. The few years that pass between new computer purchases in this day and age hardly constitute a "lifetime" in my book. On top of that if your customer goes through the link of one of your competing affiliates, that affiliate's cookie will replace yours.

Isn't there any other way to track a referred customer? Some programs track by IP address, the specific number that uniquely identifies your computer so that you can communicate with other machines on the Internet. This option can provide a little more dependability. A new computer doesn't necessarily spell the end of your commissions as long as the new computer uses the same IP address as the old computer. Of course, that's still assuming your customer has a fixed IP, and this generally only happens at work. Most home computers are connected to the Internet over a phone or cable line, and a service provider will potentially assign them a different IP address every time they turn on their computer.

Before you lose all faith in lifetime commissions, let me point out there are relatively reliable means of tracking repeat customers. When a customer places an order, they are usually required to provide at the bare minimum an email address. If they purchased a physical product, they also need to provide a shipping address. This information is stored in a database, and companies that are truly dedicated to paying lifetime commissions will include in this customer record the id of the affiliate who first referred the customer. When the customer returns to the website from any computer in the world at any point in the future, that affiliate id is still stored in the database. (This type of tracking is not fool-proof, but it is certainly more dependable than the previous options)

mentioned.)

How do you know which method(s) an affiliate program uses to track referrals? Most programs don't go into much detail in their recruitment literature because they don't want to make the process sound too complicated for people who are just getting started with affiliate programs. Any program that deserves further scrutiny will provide an email address or form to ask questions, though. Send an email specifically asking which of these methods are used.

A few companies are avoiding the issue of tracking repeat customers while still looking for ways to reward affiliates. They provide incentives such as a publicized discount for customers who return to the company's web site through your affiliate link. This idea has some merit, although it forces customers to jump through some inconvenient hoops. A good rule of thumb in business is to make it as easy for your customer to buy from you as possible.

I should also mention that an affiliate program that offers unlimited return days is not necessarily paying lifetime commissions. When someone clicks on your affiliate link, the clock starts ticking. If they come back within the specified number of return days and make their purchase, you earn a commission. Just because an affiliate program offers unlimited return days, does not mean that you will earn commission on any purchases after the initial one.

I don't mean to sound critical of return days. Return days are a boon to affiliates because many customers don't make a purchase until they've visited a site several times. Ideally as an affiliate you would like the company you work with to provide a healthy number of return days as well as lifetime commissions. When a company touts unlimited return days, though, realize nothing about a customer is stored in a database until that customer makes a purchase. So return days can only be tracked by a cookie or IP address. As stated above, these tracking methods are not perfect.

There are a lot of strong affiliate programs that don't offer lifetime commissions. The point here is to make sure you understand exactly what to expect from your compensation plan before you invest your money or (more valuable still) your time.

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Clay Mabbitt writes articles about online income opportunities. He is the founder of a community of Internet entrepreneurs sharing knowledge and experience at <http://www.affiliatescreen.com>

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