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Methods and Approaches to Prove ROI of Marketing Consulting Engagements: An Empirical Attribution Protocol for Advisory Services

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ABSTRACT: Marketing consulting is increasingly evaluated through quantified return on investment (ROI), yet advisory work often changes multiple levers at once - measurement, targeting, creative, automation, and governance - making attribution and incrementality difficult to defend under executive scrutiny. This article develops an attribution protocol tailored to consulting engagements that need auditability, causal reasoning, and practical feasibility under privacy constraints. Building on marketing productivity and metrics research (Rust et al., 2004; Seggie et al., 2007; O'Sullivan & Abela, 2007) and the attribution literature (Shao & Li, 2011; Dalessandro et al., 2012; Danaher & van Heerde, 2018; Berman, 2018), the protocol separates (a) incremental value created by the engagement from (b) channel-level credit assignment and (c) reporting conventions used by stakeholders. A simulation-based empirical demonstration shows how common rules-based approaches can misallocate uplift across channels and distort engagement-level ROI when the scope is defined around specific levers. When paid search and lifecycle improvements were the primary interventions, last-touch and time-decay approaches understated the uplift credited to those levers by roughly one third, shifting value to channels that were not improved. The proposed protocol integrates a pre-registered measurement plan, triangulation between quasi-experimental designs and attribution models, and a transparent financial bridge from marketing outcomes to contribution margin. Implications are offered for consultancies and clients seeking defensible ROI narratives in 2025–2026 conditions.

KEY WORDS: Marketing Consulting, ROI, Attribution, Incrementality, Multi-Touch Attribution, Causal Inference, Marketing Analytics.

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INTRODUCTION

In many organisations, the first question asked after a marketing consulting engagement is not "What did we learn?" but "What did we return?" That question is reasonable. Budgets are reviewed more frequently, efficiency pressures have tightened, and many firms rely on external advisors for specialised expertise. At the same time, proving return has become harder. Privacy regulation, platform constraints, and fragmented journeys can turn measurement into persuasion rather than estimation. The gap between what teams believe happened and what they can show defensibly is now a common source of friction in advisory work.

The ROI problem is not only a reporting problem. It is a design problem. When an engagement changes strategy and execution, it also changes what data are collected, how conversions are defined, which touchpoints are observable, and how decisions are governed. These changes may create real value, but they also modify the measurement instrument used to detect value. Marketing productivity research has treated this as a first-order issue for decades because metrics affect decision quality and can reshape behaviour (Rust et al., 2004; Farris et al., 2010). In consulting contexts, this is amplified: advisors may be hired precisely because the client's measurement capability is weak, yet that weakness also makes ROI claims vulnerable.

Another complication is that advisory work rarely affects one channel in isolation. Even when the contract language emphasises paid media or SEO, consultants often adjust landing-page architecture, messaging consistency, lead handling, and automation. Those actions can create spillovers across channels, while CRM hygiene can change the apparent conversion rate without changing underlying demand. When stakeholders request "attribution," they often conflate two distinct questions: how to allocate credit across touchpoints, and whether observed uplift is truly incremental rather than seasonal, competitive, or demand-driven.

Financial translation adds a further layer. Many teams track clicks, impressions, leads, and sometimes pipeline. Advisory ROI, however, needs a bridge to contribution margin, retention, and risk. Ambler (2000) framed marketing as an investment that contributes to corporate wealth rather than as an operating cost justified by a single conversion metric. Empirical evidence that customer satisfaction relates to financial performance reinforces that marketing outcomes can translate into value through more than immediate conversions (Fornell et al., 2006). The practical implication is that consulting ROI claims requires transparent economic assumptions, not only attribution outputs.

In 2025–2026, the environment amplifies these issues. Industry reports describe a shift toward integrated measurement, CRM-centric orchestration, and AI-enabled workflows, which increase both the opportunity for improvement and the number of moving parts that can confound measurement (HubSpot, 2025; Salesforce, 2024; Marketing AI Institute, 2025). Budget scrutiny also persists. Gartner's CMO spend snapshots frame ROI pressure as a structural feature of current marketing leadership, not a temporary event (Gartner, 2025).

This article develops an attribution protocol tailored to marketing consulting engagements that must be defensible, auditable, and feasible under contemporary constraints. The protocol integrates three ideas. First, ROI proof requires an explicit causal estimand: what outcome difference, over what window, relative to what baseline, attributable to what set of consulting actions. Second, incrementality and attribution should be separated: incrementality establishes whether the engagement changed outcomes; attribution then explains mechanisms and allocates incremental value across levers. Third, ROI evidence should include an audit trail and a finance-ready bridge from outcomes to contribution margin, aligned with the measurement-system perspective in the marketing metrics literature (Farris et al., 2010; Seggie et al., 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

ROI evidence for consulting sits at the intersection of marketing productivity, organisational measurement capability, attribution modelling, and the practical reality of how firms adopt metrics. A foundational insight from productivity research is that marketing performance measurement must connect intermediate outcomes to financial value through a coherent chain. Rust et al. (2004) argue that productivity measurement should link marketing actions to outcomes and then to value, rather than treating ROI as a single after-the-fact ratio. Consulting work often targets exactly these links by reshaping targeting, execution, and governance, which makes productivity frameworks a natural foundation for an advisory ROI protocol.

The organisational lens is important because measuring well is not free. O'Sullivan and Abela (2007) show that marketing performance measurement ability is associated with firm performance, implying that the act of building measurement capability can itself be performance-relevant. This supports a recurring consulting reality: an engagement may create immediate uplift through optimisation, but it may also create longer-term value by improving the client's measurement routines, decision speed, and accountability mechanisms. A protocol that proves ROI must therefore distinguish between short-term optimisation effects and the capability effects that change how the organisation learns.

Marketing analytics research strengthens this point by describing analytics as a strategic resource in data-rich environments. Wedel and Kannan (2016) describe the shift toward analytics-driven marketing in contexts where data volume is high but causal clarity is low. Consulting engagements often promise to convert data abundance into decision quality. That promise is credible only if the measurement logic is defensible, because analytics applied to biased or incomplete data can simply add confidence to incorrect conclusions.

Attribution research provides tools for allocating credit across touchpoints, but also warns against treating attribution outputs as causal truth. Data-driven multi-touch attribution models learn weights from observed journeys to estimate channel contributions (Shao & Li, 2011). This also aligns with the broader customer journey perspective that treats experience as a sequence of episodes across touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Yet the attribution literature is explicit that observational journey data can be confounded: exposure is not random, and intent is often unobserved. Dalessandro et al. (2012) therefore argue that attribution should be causally motivated, framing channel credit as a causal estimation problem rather than a purely statistical pattern-recognition task.

The caution is intensified by empirical critiques. Danaher and van Heerde (2018) warn that attribution can be delusional when used for budget allocation, because past exposure patterns are not the same thing as advertising effectiveness, and because allocation rules can embed misleading assumptions. Berman (2018) shows that moving beyond last-touch attribution changes the equilibrium incentives in online advertising and can materially alter interpretations of channel value. In consulting practice, these cautions translate into a simple point: attribution models can be useful, but they are not automatically "proof" of ROI, especially when used without an explicit counterfactual.

Research on metrics usage reinforces the social dimension of ROI proof. Ling-yee (2011) links marketing metrics usage to CRM performance, suggesting that metrics matter partly because they shape behaviour and processes. Farris et al. (2010) emphasise that metrics systems influence what managers see and therefore what they prioritise. This is relevant for consulting because ROI evidence is consumed within incentive structures. The "right" metric is often the one that aligns with organisational narratives, which creates the risk that ROI reporting becomes optimised for plausibility rather than validity.

Finally, applied evidence on marketing automation and accountability supports treating governance and systems as ROI mechanisms. Silva et al. (2023) report links between marketing automation, accountability practices, and performance outcomes. Many consulting engagements focus on operational pathways—speed-to-lead, segmentation discipline, and lifecycle orchestration—that improve performance without necessarily producing obvious immediate media ROAS changes. A robust ROI protocol must therefore include mediating indicators and process outcomes, while still reserving causal claims for what can be defended.

Industry benchmarks shape what clients expect ROI to look like, even when those benchmarks are not peer-reviewed. HubSpot (2025) highlights fragmented channel realities and the emphasis on integrated measurement. Salesforce (2024) frames CRM integration and unified profiles as central to modern marketing effectiveness. Gartner (2025) positions ROI pressure in the context of budgeting constraints, while Deloitte Digital (2025) describes an environment where adaptation is a strategic requirement rather than a tactical option. These sources matter because the credibility of an ROI narrative depends not only on methods but also on stakeholder expectations about what "modern" measurement should involve.

METHODOLOGY

The protocol proposed here is designed as a decision-and-audit framework rather than as a single statistical model. Its purpose is to specify what must be defined, estimated, and documented to support a defensible ROI claim for advisory services. The protocol begins by defining the engagement as a treatment with explicit scope boundaries and a clear mechanism map. In practical terms, advisory work is a bundle: analytic setup, campaign restructuring, creative guidance, landing-page optimisation, lifecycle automation, and governance changes. Without scoping, ROI becomes a moving target.

The next requirement is a pre-specified measurement plan. This plan defines primary outcomes, secondary outcomes, data sources, and transformation rules. Primary outcomes should be those that can be credibly linked to value, such as incremental contribution margin from incremental conversions, retention-adjusted revenue, or pipeline outcomes with verified close rates. Secondary outcomes are leading indicators expected to mediate financial impact, such as qualified lead rate, stage-to-stage conversion, speed-to-lead, and churn-related metrics. Seggie et al. (2007) emphasise that measurement systems should reflect time horizons and intangible assets; the measurement plan operationalises that idea for consulting contexts.

A core rule of the protocol is to separate incrementality from attribution. Incrementality answers, "How much outcome change is causally attributable to the engagement, relative to a baseline?" Attribution answers, "How should credit be allocated among touchpoints or levers?" The protocol prioritises establishing incrementality at the outcome level using the strongest feasible design, and then using attribution methods to allocate and explain the incremental effect. This ordering reflects attribution critiques: observational credit assignment can be misleading when treated as causal proof (Dalessandro et al., 2012; Danaher & van Heerde, 2018).

Identification strategies are prioritised by credibility and feasibility. When feasible, randomised experiments are preferred: geo holdouts, matched-market tests, audience-level lift studies, or staggered rollouts where some markets adopt the consulting-driven change later. When experiments are infeasible, quasi-experimental approaches are used, such as difference-in-differences with pre-trend checks, synthetic control, or interrupted time series. In many engagements, a hybrid is possible: a limited holdout can validate directionality while broader observational models allocate value. The protocol treats methodological pluralism as a strength when it is documented and when causal claims are bounded to what designs support.

Once incrementality is established, attribution methods are applied to allocate incremental value across touchpoints or levers. Data-driven multi-touch attribution is useful when touchpoints are observable, and path data are sufficiently rich to learn robust patterns (Shao & Li, 2011). Graph-based journey models can also represent sequence and dependency structures that simpler rules miss (Anderl et al., 2016). The protocol treats these outputs as allocation tools rather than causal identification tools. Where attribution conflicts with experimental evidence, the protocol requires explanation and prioritises causal designs for ROI claims.

The protocol includes a financial bridge that translates measured outcomes into contribution margin and ROI. This bridge documents the unit economics assumptions used, such as gross margin, retention, refunds, and cost-to-serve. It also documents how pipeline outcomes translate into expected revenue, using verified close rates rather than aspirational targets. Because marketing outcomes can influence value through satisfaction and retention mechanisms, the bridge may include validated customer metrics as inputs, consistent with evidence linking satisfaction and financial performance (Fornell et al., 2006).

An audit trail is mandatory. It records data lineage, versioned metric definitions, exclusions, and anomalies, and it pairs the main ROI estimate with sensitivity checks. The aim is not to show a single perfect number, but to show how conclusions behave when

reasonable assumptions change, reflecting the organisational reality that metrics are used for decisions and justification (Farris et al., 2010; Ling-yee, 2011).

To illustrate how the protocol behaves under realistic journey dynamics, an empirical simulation study was conducted. Simulation is useful because the "true" incremental contributions are known by construction, which makes it possible to compare attribution rules under controlled confounding, a concern emphasised in the attribution critique literature (Danaher & van Heerde, 2018; Dalessandro et al., 2012). The simulated setting reflects a mid-market digital funnel with repeated exposures across paid search, paid social, email, and organic touchpoints, plus latent intent that affects exposure and conversion.

RESULTS

In the simulation, the consulting intervention produced an expected incremental contribution margin of approximately **$4,635,605** over the post-period compared with the pre-period, holding journey volume constant. Using an oracle Shapley benchmark to allocate this incremental value across channels, paid search captured the largest share of uplift at about **$2,507,869**, and email captured about **$1,858,558**. Organic captured a smaller share at roughly **$476,247**, while paid social showed a **negative** contribution of approximately **–$207,069**, reflecting the modelled reduction in its effectiveness.

When the same uplift was allocated using an expected last-touch rule, the distribution shifted materially. Paid search and email were credited with about **$1,716,751** and **$1,116,887**, while organic was credited with about **$1,218,605** and paid social with about **$583,363**. A time-decay multi-touch rule produced a similar pattern, crediting paid search and email with about **$1,763,236** and **$1,166,262**, while crediting organic with about **$1,172,164** and paid social with about **$533,943**.

This reallocation matters most when an engagement is evaluated on in-scope levers rather than on total performance change. If the contract and delivery are centred on paid search plus lifecycle/email, the relevant uplift is the value allocated to those levers. Under the Oracle benchmark, in-scope uplift is approximately **$4,366,427**. Under last-touch and time-decay, in-scope uplift falls to approximately **$2,833,637** and **$2,929,498**, because a large portion of uplift is attributed to organic and paid social, despite those channels not being improved in the simulated intervention.

To illustrate the effect on the ROI narrative, consider a consulting fee of **$300,000**. Under the oracle allocation, the ROI for the in-scope levers is approximately **13.6**×. Under last-touch and time-decay, the same engagement would appear to return about **8.4**× to **8.8**× when assessed only on paid search and email. The difference reflects systematic allocation shifts caused by journey structure and confounding, not random noise.

A bootstrap procedure on resampled journeys was used to approximate uncertainty in the oracle in-scope uplift estimate. After scaling to full volume, the 95% interval for paid search plus email uplift was approximately **$4,199,696** to **$4,539,754**. This indicates that, in this demonstration, the dominant threat to defensible consulting ROI is not statistical instability but methodological slippage: using attribution rules as a proxy for incrementality and scope-level value.

DISCUSSION

The demonstration surfaces a common problem in consulting ROI discussions. Total uplift can appear stable across different attribution rules because allocation changes do not necessarily change the total. Yet consulting is rarely judged only on the total. It is judged on whether the engagement created value through the promised levers and whether that value is defensible when challenged by finance, executives, or procurement. When attribution rules shift value away from the levers in scope, they distort both the narrative and the accountability structure.

This is why the protocol insists on separations. The first separation is between a counterfactual and a story. In practice, teams often infer causality from temporal coincidence: performance improved after the consultant arrived, therefore the consultant caused the improvement. A defensible protocol instead defines an estimand and uses a design to approximate what would have happened without the engagement. This aligns with the attribution literature's emphasis that observational journey data can confound exposure with intent (Dalessandro et al., 2012).

The second separation is between incremental value creation and credit assignment. Multi-touch attribution methods can be powerful for describing journeys and supporting tactical decisions, especially when they incorporate sequence structure (Shao & Li, 2011; Anderl et al., 2016). However, the same methods can be misused when treated as causal truth. Danaher and van Heerde (2018) explicitly caution that attribution may mislead allocation decisions when confounding and measurement limits are ignored, and Berman (2018) demonstrates that attribution can alter incentives and interpretations even when it improves descriptive fit. For consulting ROI, this implies that attribution outputs should be framed as allocation evidence inside an incremental effect estimate, not as a substitute for incrementality.

The third separation is between marketing outcomes and financial value. A consulting ROI claim becomes more credible when it includes a transparent bridge from outcomes to contribution margin, documents unit economics assumptions, and aligns with finance's recognition rules. This is consistent with the marketing productivity tradition that treats marketing as an investment with

multiple value pathways (Rust et al., 2004; Ambler, 2000). It is also consistent with work emphasising that ROI measurement is a system rather than a single metric (Seggie et al., 2007; Farris et al., 2010).

The contemporary environment heightens both demand for ROI proof and the risk of brittle proof. Gartner's spend snapshots show that marketing leaders operate under persistent budget scrutiny and must justify allocation choices under uncertainty (Gartner, 2025). Practitioner reports emphasise CRM integration, data unification, and automation, increasing the number of components that can change at once during consulting engagements (Salesforce, 2024; HubSpot, 2025). Deloitte's trends narrative frames adaptation as a strategic necessity, which often pushes firms to adopt new tools and workflows rapidly (Deloitte Digital, 2025). Meanwhile, AI adoption is accelerating and is increasingly embedded in targeting, content workflows, and measurement layers, creating new attribution challenges and new governance risks (Marketing AI Institute, 2025).

Two limitations deserve emphasis. First, the empirical demonstration uses simulation rather than a field dataset, so it illustrates mechanisms rather than estimating real-world parameters. That said, simulation is appropriate when the goal is to stress-test attribution under known truth conditions, especially when confounding is central to the question (Danaher & van Heerde, 2018; Dalessandro et al., 2012). Second, the protocol does not eliminate judgment; it structures it. Decisions about windows, baselines, value-per-conversion, and inclusion criteria still require managerial assumptions, but those assumptions are made explicit, versioned, and tested through sensitivity analysis.

Practically, the protocol leads to a more disciplined consulting delivery. Before optimisation begins, the engagement defines what "success" means in financial terms and how it will be estimated. During execution, the consultant prioritises interventions that can be measured credibly and tracks mechanisms that explain how value is created. After execution, the consultant reports ROI with an explicit baseline, a documented allocation approach, and a sensitivity analysis that shows how robust the conclusion is under reasonable alternative assumptions. That kind of reporting tends to be more persuasive in executive settings because it treats uncertainty as part of reality rather than as an inconvenience.

CONCLUSIONS

Proving ROI for marketing consulting engagements requires more than calculating attributed revenue divided by fees. It requires a protocol that defines the causal question, selects an identification strategy that is feasible under real constraints, and separates incremental value creation from channel credit assignment. Marketing productivity and metrics research underscores that measurement systems must connect actions to value through coherent chains and appropriate horizons (Rust et al., 2004; Ambler, 2000; Seggie et al., 2007; O'Sullivan & Abela, 2007).

The empirical demonstration shows why this separation matters in consulting practice: when an engagement is assessed on in-scope levers, common attribution rules can shift incremental value toward channels that were not improved, distorting scope-level ROI. A defensible protocol, therefore, integrates a pre-specified measurement plan, a credible incrementality design, an attribution layer used for allocation rather than causal identification, and a transparent financial bridge to contribution margin and longer-term customer value.

Future research can test this protocol across real consulting portfolios and compare outcomes under different identification strategies, especially as privacy constraints continue to limit observability. There is also room for empirical work on how consulting-driven capability improvements translate into durable performance, extending evidence on analytics capability, metrics usage, and automation into consulting-specific settings (Wedel & Kannan, 2016; Ling-yee, 2011; Silva et al., 2023).

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