Cheryl Broom (5s):
Hi, I'm Cheryl Broom, CEO of GradComm and host of Higher Ed Conversations sponsored by Ed Tech Connect. Today's guest is someone who has worked behind the scenes on hundreds of our campaigns over the year, but whose work is mostly hidden. Raj Sudra is the Chief Technology Officer for Gannett. We here at grad com use a Gannett platform, local IQ to build out our digital media campaigns. I asked Raj to come on the podcast to explain how they track campaign effectiveness and attribution, and also to talk about changes in online tracking pixel codes and cookies. In light of upcoming changes with Apple and laws protecting consumer data, you'll hear us talk about Christmas sweaters.

Cheryl Broom (48s):
That's because we recorded this a week before Christmas and I had been noticing a ton of remarketing and retargeting going on, particularly around my search for the perfect sweater. This conversation will help you better understand how digital campaigns are tracked and also how you are tracked as a consumer. Raj also gives us a 32nd soundbite on how you can explain tracking to those on your college campus who may be worried about privacy or just technology in general. It's a great conversation and I hope you enjoy it. Alright, Raj, Thank you so much for joining the podcast today. I'm so excited to have you here.

Raj Sudra (1m 29s):
Happy to be here.

Cheryl Broom (1m 31s):
So let's start off, just tell me a little bit about your role at Gannett and what your responsibilities are as the Chief Technology Officer.

Raj Sudra (1m 40s):
Absolutely. So I basically head up the technology function as the Chief Technology Officer for a, what I call an arm of Gannett. So we are, we basically provide a set of products and services to advertisers that want to be found on the internet. And in a nutshell, our job is to make the telephone ring and generate leads. We provide a variety of digital products and services and I basically look after everything related to technology, be it strategy, be it, you know, day-to-day operations, be it compliance, be it security, be it infrastructure. You know, I've got a team of north of 120 folks that are distributed between the US, India, and Bulgaria.

Cheryl Broom (2m 27s):
Wow, okay. Well you're a busy guy. I'm so glad that you had some time to join me today. Cool. So we use Local IQ, which is a subsidiary of Gannett Media as our platform to book digital media for our higher education clients. So we're pretty familiar with some of the technology that you use to track digital campaigns. Can you explain a little bit about these, the methods that, that you use that and that we use here at GradComm to make sure campaigns are working and to get the type of information we need to make, make better decisions?

Raj Sudra (3m 1s):

So, you know, the topic we're gonna talk about is, is really attribution and, and how do we attribute the money that you're spending with us and generating the leads, which is sort of a, a byproduct. So we have a piece of technology that is, we have built that is proprietary to us that we call Capture. And that has been built through our teams over the years. But the way I describe that is think of Google Analytics. A lot of folks are familiar with Google Analytics and, and what Google Analytics is, you introduce a piece of code and you implement that onto your website. And what that is doing, it's basically tracking what your, what is happening on your website.

Raj Sudra (3m 44s):
When somebody lands on your one of your pages, it basically says, okay, this traffic came from this particular source, here is what the user did on your website or page, and here are the actions that they took. We have something that is very similar but very proprietary to Local IQ, which gives us the ability to sort of take that lead. So a lead could be a telephone conversation, a lead could be a form fill lead, could be a chat now leads, you know, with AI and what's, what's happening with sort of everyone's talking about ai, but it could be a conversation that's taking place between a service representative of, of one of our advertisers.

Raj Sudra (4m 30s):
And through that, you know, there could be an exchange and that could be a lead as well coming in through voice. So that's the technology that we use. Most of our advertisers will use a combination of our capture code, which which gets implemented onto their website. They will also have a combination of Google Analytics configured within their website. So those are the two main sort of attribution models that we use to show our advertisers the value that we're creating for them.

Cheryl Broom (5m 5s):
That's great. And I, we always tell, you know, our clients, okay, we're gonna especially pay per click or retargeting. We're like, here's a pixel code now you need to put this on on the website. And so a lot of our clients are like suspicious of that. What is this, what is it gonna do? What is it gonna track? Is it tracking like personal data? So what exactly like does it track, what is it looking at?

Raj Sudra (5m 26s):
Pixel tracking is, this is something that, that is sort of defacto attribution that's been with us as long as the internet has been with us and digital marketing. So what, lemme first sort of step back and, and just sort of let our, our use our, our audience know what a Pixel is and, and how it works.

Cheryl Broom (5m 47s):
Oh, Great. Because I don't even know what it's, it just, for me it's just like a line. I just see a line of text. That's what I know about

Raj Sudra (5m 54s):

A a a pixel is a piece of code that gets implemented onto the page, I'll call it, or the website page. And when somebody lands on that and clicks on that, it basically is then going and talking to a backend server where all this information is being collected to, to say, okay, Raj clicked on this page and landed here and here is where he came from in terms of traffic. And, and so that information is all being sort of centralized and, and stored back onto the server. What type of information is being stored is probably the next question.

Raj Sudra (6m 37s):
Generically speaking, it's the IP address of of where that user came from, the device that was used. It could be a tablet, it could be a desktop, it could be a cell phone in terms of device types. And what was the browser that that was used to basically interact and, and at times there are some other pieces of information that are collected, but I wanna caveat, we are so sensitive to personal information with all the privacy legislation that's out there, GDPR and CCPA as an example.

Raj Sudra (7m 18s):
So we are, you know, and, and then there are the HIPAA categories that one has to really sit down and consider. So we will only, we'll look at what our advertisers needs are in terms of driving their campaigns that we really will go back and say, Hey, we cannot capture these types of information because you are in this category and make sure from a security and compliance and a privacy viewpoint, we don't run into problems. So we in a way, at times we'll educate our advertisers of what, because advertisers wanna capture everything and know everything about everybody, right? We're, we're in, we're we're in this paradoxical situation right now where our users, sorry, the user that's on the internet wants a very personalized experience, right?

Raj Sudra (8m 12s):
We, we, we all love it when we get content that sort of resonates with us, but the, but the counter to that is in order to do that we need to know a lot more about the consumer and collect that information. But on the flip side of that, there's a lot of security that changes that are taking place. There are a lot of browser changes, apple with its policies and, and being a brand that is very close to privacy and security is changing the whole ecosystem. So I'm hopefully sort of giving you some color in terms of all the forces that are driving the, this attribution and how it works.

Raj Sudra (8m 56s):
And I'm happy to sort of go down and, and dig in into one or two areas. But it's a challenging field because the a from, from a advertising digital, if I was to put my digital advertising hat on, yes, I want to know everything about everybody, but over the years we've really had to take a look at that and look at the legislation and make sure there's a balance in place in terms of, you know, the data that we do collect and we don't run foul into any of the policies and the legislation that's out there.

Cheryl Broom (9m 27s):

Yeah. And then that's something, I mean, on our end as marketers, I mean we want to know like when you click on a Google ad now, where are you going on the college website? What are you doing? How are you spending your time? And I mean, we're up against the same sort of privacy even apart from your pixel code because a student might click on an ad and go around the website and then they click on the apply button and now they're starting to fill out personal information and we can't track them anymore. Like we lose them at that point. They go into a system and they're giving their social security number and, and then I'll go in front of like a board of trustees and they'll be like, well how many people enrolled because of that ad? And I'm like, well you, I can't tell you that because it's all private information once they become students.

Cheryl Broom (10m 12s):
So there's this, this push and pull between like wanting attribution and data and privacy and it, it's hard, it's very challenging for marketers to do their job and also just to show performance. So I know like what advice you have for marketers, like what, what should we be doing? What should we be looking at from a technology point of view to, to tell that story better?

Raj Sudra (10m 38s):
There, there is, with all the changes that are taking place right now. So obviously we're very concerned about PII data, which is personal identifiable, you know, information. But what there are techniques that people are starting to sort of look at, if you look at Google gives you an aggregate, Google analytics will give you an aggregated view as to what's happening on the website, where the traffic's coming from, but will never allow you to go down to the individual. And I think that's sort of becoming the best practices moving forward. Now if somebody's doing a form fill, as long as they give you consent.

Raj Sudra (11m 18s):
So what, what's, what's, what's really transpiring through, through everything and all the changes that are taking place is we have this new paradigm where if I give you consent, then it's okay for you to collect that information. And that's the hurdle that a lot of digital marketing individuals are really sort of grappling with because they want the experience to be seamless. But now, you know, I was in the UK a couple of days ago and what was interesting for me is I was going to Yahoo News and looking at the stock prices, but before I could do that, it came up with a model to say, Hey, are you opting in and this is what we collect and are you okay with it?

Raj Sudra (12m 6s):
And the experience is, is a little disruptive if you think about it, but that's, that's what's happening. Apple is asking you the same thing within its ecosystem to say, here is, are you okay opting in and, and giving permission for the advertiser to have access to this data? And you can say no and, and then they won't get that piece of information. So when it comes to, I, I wish I had a magic wand to say this is the way it should be done. I don't think anyone's really cracked it, but that's the change we're going through. And companies are HubSpot as an example, or Adobe analytics, they are certainly looking at those problems and trying to figure out how to sort of have a, have a seamless experience from a user, consumer viewpoint without these types of funky experiences I call them.

Raj Sudra (13m 5s):
But at the same time still allow people to collect the information that they need in order to provide that personalized, personalized targeting and, and and experience in terms of serving digital ads.

Cheryl Broom (13m 19s):
I'm curious if you clicked Yes,

Raj Sudra (13m 21s):
I did because I sometimes the experience when you don't say yes, the experience within, so I'm used to going to, I'll give you an example. I'm used to going to Yahoo Finance and it sort of knows me And it knows what, what I want. And if I didn't then I, the experience would be slightly different. So I sort of knowing that, but yes,

Cheryl Broom (13m 47s):
I always say yes too because, well, I'm a marketer, so I wanna see, I wanna see what's going on when, you know, who's gonna be marketing to me and how it adjusts my interactions online. So I, I wonder how how many people are cooking no. Versus yes, I don't,

Raj Sudra (14m 2s):
I I'm sure, I'm sure you know, somebody out there has those metrics. I know in terms of how many people say yes and how many people say no. But you know, there is a lot of focus on what information are you collecting? Legislation is this, I I sit in California, so I'm very up to speed on CCPA as an example. And we, you know, we have consumers that are I, that are clients of our clients that, that will come to, through that mechanism, come to us and say, what information do you have about me within your ecosystem? And at times we have to sort of provide that level of visibility.

Raj Sudra (14m 45s):
Now the good news is Gannett and, and local iq, one of the, being part of a newspaper group and being part of a much larger public company, we take security and data privacy. It's, it's, it's, it's foundational to us. It's, if we have to put it into our DNA, we have a data privacy officer that does nothing but look at legislation and what we're doing and she polices what I do, you know, she, she takes a keen interest and represents the consumer, not only the consumer, but also our advertisers through all the products and services that we provide. And really questions, what data are we collecting?

Raj Sudra (15m 28s):
Is that data encrypted? Because it's, it's not only about the experience in terms of serving digital ads and, and getting those leads, generating those leads and then figuring out did they convert or not. Right? That's, that's the business we're in. But what we have to now look at within my remit is where is that data stored and is it secured? Because we, you know, I'm sure everybody

gets to hear about their social security numbers being out there and you know, these major data brokers being hacked and, and that becomes, it becomes a real trust issue,

Cheryl Broom (16m 7s):
Right? Yeah. And I'm happy to hear that. I think that's really one of the main reasons that we love partnering with Gannett and Local IQ is, you know, doing this on our own. We don't have a data compliance officer or people who are following the legislation. So, you know, we rely on your company to, to make sure that, you know, colleges are protected and the data's protected and our pixel codes aren't invading anybody's privacy. So it's probably a big relief for clients listening like, oh, we, they may not even thought about everything that's going on behind the scenes to not just make your campaign effective, but also to protect people's privacy.

Raj Sudra (16m 49s):
Absolutely. It's something we have to, as a, as a business, we pay a lot of attention to it and I, I'm, I haven't come across another agency out there that's in a similar business, but one of the things that we push for in 2023 and 2024 is that we're a SOC two type two compliant organization. And that is the industry standard that's like the gold standard from a security viewpoint. And it's becoming, you know, I I think as these changes sort of work their way through the ecosystem, I think a lot more advertisers are, are gonna be demanding that their agencies have a SOC two type two.

Raj Sudra (17m 32s):
So what that basically, it, it's, it provides an element of comfort because it stipulates how we deal with the data, how we collect the data, how we store the data, is the data encrypted, who do we share that data with? And we actually go out to Google and at times get them to show us their policies because it's, it's all, you know, we're at times an intermediary between ourselves and Google in terms of AdWords and what they're doing. They're at, they're serving up the ad we're sort of creating the campaign on behalf of our advertiser. So I I think there's gonna be a lot more scrutiny going forward.

Cheryl Broom (18m 17s):
Well, I wanna take a quick break to hear from our sponsor when we get back. I wanna talk a little bit about the technology behind behavioral targeting and how all of that happens. So we'll be right back. How do higher education decision makers find the right solution when technology evolves at light speed? Well, we usually start with our network Ed. Tech Connect is the network that's democratizing the higher ed technology conversation. Ed Tech Connect is free, so anyone with a .edu email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. Once you're in, you can find out what solutions similar schools are doing all over the country.

Cheryl Broom (19m 0s):
Whether you're looking to find the hot new AI tool or maybe Learn options, you have to upgrade your campus search engine or even get to your short list of marketing solution vendors. Ed Tech Connect is the place to go. So visit Ed Tech Connect dotcom and set up your free profile to get

a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today. Alright. So we talked a lot about privacy before the break and now I wanna dig into the nitty gritty of how some things happen on the backend. And I know Ra had told me before we started that you were not gonna get too technical. So we'll see, we'll see how you can, I'll try getting too technical.

Cheryl Broom (19m 40s):
So I know this happens to a lot of people, but it really stood out to me the other night. I, there's a brand of like sweaters that I really like and I was looking for a Christmas sweater. I went on their website and I looked around and I didn't find anything I like, and then I was on Facebook that night and I saw their ads and then the next day my son who like is a YouTube, all he does is watch YouTube. My 9-year-old, that's all he, he does not watch shows. He just watches YouTube and he watches it on our TV and a sweater ad was on YouTube, remember this. And I actually, the YouTube surprised me more than Facebook. Facebook I see all the time, but all of a sudden I've seen like a beautiful woman in a sweater And it's the same brand. And I was like, oh wow.

Cheryl Broom (20m 20s):
They've really, they really got me. So how, how does all of that come to be? How does that work on the backend?

Raj Sudra (20m 29s):
Okay, so when you go and you, when you go to a website and you show interest, you land on a website. It, it, it's basically, let's, let's take Christmas sweaters as an example. You know, they're selling Christmas sweaters. You go there, they're probably doing one of, they're probably doing one of two things. The first thing that still happens, and I know that this is being phased out, but they're probably sending a cookie and putting a cookie on your device to say, this is who you are, this is where you came from, and it's like a fingerprint. You'll take a fingerprint and, and put that on the device. So the next time you go there, if the cookie's still there, they'll say, oh, we already know this person.

Raj Sudra (21m 14s):
We already know that they came and looked at this last time and they're back again. And on the back of that they'll try and figure out what else should they show you to keep your interest and ultimately get you to buy a sweater. But the way the, so it's it's, it's a combination of, of Excel tracking and it's probably a combination of cookies that are being set in the backend. And a lot of these, if you are within the Google ecosystem, the reason that they want you to log in as soon as you log, as soon as you sort of bring up your browser there, they're always asking you to log in to Google. Right?

Cheryl Broom (21m 51s):
They, yeah, that's, it actually annoys me. I'm like, I don't wanna log in, I just wanna go find something. Okay. But they want you, that's kind a reason.

Raj Sudra (21m 58s):

Yeah. But the reason they want you to log in is obviously with Apple's big move to stop sharing third party cookies and, and get their browsers not to participate in that ecosystem. It's disrupted everything. So now Google wants you to log in because once you log in, they know who you are and, and once you're logged in, they know where you're going and what you're seeing. 'cause you're using Chrome as your browser and they can track all of your interactions and your interests and what you're looking at. And it's, it's all part of one big ecosystem. And all that information is, is being centralized somewhere. So they've got a very good profile of your interests and what you're doing in real time and on the back of that, they're serving up these different ads to you.

Raj Sudra (22m 47s):
So I'm, I'm trying to keep it high level just to sort of give you a feel for how it works. There's a lot more complexity underneath it, but that's in general, that's why most publishers today want to go to first party data because they want you to log into their application and once you log in, they know exactly. Now they're not dependent on the, on the cookies that will go away.

Cheryl Broom (23m 10s):
Yeah. And I guess behind the scenes, like, I mean, YouTube is owned by Google, right? That's a Google product, but Facebook is not.

Raj Sudra (23m 20s):
So Facebook has its own ad tag mechanism. It it has a similar piece of technology that sits outside of the Google ecosystem. But having said that, I'm sure somebody somewhere, you know, do the multi-channel attribution capabilities. There are different browsers, different devices and piece it all together and still sort of show you, okay, this is what you, this is follow you on the internet. Is is the way I would describe it.

Cheryl Broom (23m 57s):
And probably I'm, I'm thinking about our own education campaigns. Like we will do website retargeting two Facebook, you put a pixel on the college website and you're, you say, Hey, anybody comes to the website, we want them to now see an ad on Facebook. And the same with YouTube. Like, oh, we could put that on the, on the website. If anybody comes to your website and then they go to YouTube, we want them to see pre-roll. So you, you end up popping up everywhere. It's pretty impressive when you actually pay attention and see it happen to you. Like with this sweater, I was like, wow, they really want me to buy this sweater. Like this is, they've just spent a good amount of money trying to get me back on their site. Like it's

Raj Sudra (24m 35s):
Pretty, so the way I've seen it done is using the email, your email because, because that, that is sort of unique to you and, and, and especially in retargeting. I've seen that used, but there are other techniques that are out there. Fingerprinting is definitely something that is, it's, it's not quite there yet, but there's a lot of company working on that in trying to make that they can take fingerprints across different ecosystems and bring it together and then consolidate that view. It's, it's an evolving field. I mean I, I'll be honest with you, I struggle at times trying to keep up with

what's going on. And more recently with, with what's happening with AI, I was reading a paper the other day where they want to take certain pieces of information about you that's limited, but use the AI to do predictions in terms of how would you behave.

Cheryl Broom (25m 30s):
Wow, that's really interesting. I mean, even in education there's some modeling going on, like how do certain types of people like stack up in terms of completion? Like what attributes does Cheryl have that makes her a student that's more likely to complete and then ranking her like higher on the list as one that admissions officer should pay more attention to. 'cause she's more likely to graduate. So let's pay more attention to her, let's market more to her because if we get her to come here, she's gonna complete. And so everything's changes becoming more sophisticated. It's not just like this broadcast let's just cast a wide net technology helping us make decisions a little bit more, I don't wanna say better, I don't know if it's better.

Cheryl Broom (26m 15s):
Hmm. It's a good philosophical question. Is it better?

Raj Sudra (26m 18s):
It's, you know, we can talk philosophy and ethics, which are two other subjects very dear to my heart when it comes to digital marketing. But yeah, no, look, AI is definitely bringing a lot more capabilities to the table without intruding on privacy. Is, is the way I would, is the way I'm thinking about it. If, if somebody's gonna really sort the, as I call it, I think that that the, the between those two posts, if AI can do something, then I think people will get a very personalized experience and you know, we can, we can be very precise in sort of targeting based on what they're looking for in terms in your, in your domain it's about college students and you know, enrollments within certain institutions and, and really sort of refining that process.

Raj Sudra (27m 8s):
But ai, I'm amazed at, at what it can do. If I was to go back sort of six, 12 months, it was like, whoa, it can do this. But now it's like, whoa, it just blows my mind. If you look at the virtual agents and the human interactions and how they could represent a customer service representative, it's scary in some ways.

Cheryl Broom (27m 30s):
Yeah. Well, as we're wrapping up our conversation, I'm, I, well I'm hoping you can help me out with something. I'm hoping I can take a sound bite of you and please for my clients. So we had a, we, Raja and I worked together a couple months ago because we had one college that was worried about the pixel code, was worried about privacy, it was worried about slowing down the website. It just wasn't familiar with the technology. So we were able to meet with them and, and explain how it worked and, and those are people who are listening that work at colleges won't be surprised. There were like 12 people in the meeting and it like the Vice President and it became this big deal and, and we ended up addressing their concerns and the codes on the website and everything's happening really well.

Cheryl Broom (28m 14s):
But the truth is, most technology officers at colleges just don't have the background in digital marketing to understand what it is that we need for them to put on their website. So I'm hoping you can give me just an explanation that our college marketers can take back to their technology team to explain like what this thing does and how it's safe. Like what would you tell them? What, what's your 32nd soundbite?

Raj Sudra (28m 42s):
My, okay, 32nd soundbite. It's a piece of code that sits on your website that really sends a signal to our technology where we can then take that and show you a lead or the behavior.

Cheryl Broom (29m 2s):
Oh, that was great. That was like 15 seconds. You, you understood the assignment. So it's a piece of technology that allows us to show you the behavior, somebody visiting the site and whether or not they become a lead. And we know from talking to you that the platform you use is, has the highest level of privacy compliance. So we're not tracking anything illegally. We're just helping you see how effective your marketing is and that you can make better decisions.

Raj Sudra (29m 33s):
Absolutely. Yeah. The only, the only thing I would put on the table on the backer to support that is the SOC two, type two is a completely third party piece of certification. So it's not like we're saying, Hey, we're, we're secure. Trust us. It's, it's, it's an industry standard and that's one of the reasons that we made the investment and got that.

Cheryl Broom (29m 55s):
Well, and you know what, that's a great thing I think for people who aren't clients with GradComm to ask their media people to do you have the SOC two compliance. Yeah. Because now that I don't even know what that compliance is, but now that I know it, I would definitely wanna ask my media partner if they are compliant because that's the gold standard.

Raj Sudra (30m 18s):
Get them to Google it. It's, it's, they should if they're in, in this, in, if I was in their positions, that's what I would ask for.

Cheryl Broom (30m 30s):
Well, Thank you so much. I really appreciate your time. I know how busy you are and thank you for, for not putting me to sleep with Tech lingo. It was actually No, it's a lot. Yeah. I'm even thinking own marketing. I need to put on there that we use a platform that's compliant and that has, you know, I think that's a really important thing that people should know when they're starting to invest in digital marketing. That, that we are really paying attention to consumer consent. We're transparent, we're protecting privacy, we're up to date. We know what the legal laws are. I mean, those are really important things when it comes to, to the digital online presence.

Raj Sudra (31m 9s):
Absolutely. It's been a pleasure. Thank you. And happy holidays to everybody.

Cheryl Broom (31m 12s):
Yes, Thank you so much. And that wraps up this episode of the Higher Education Conversations podcast. I'm Host and GradComm CEO Cheryl Broom. A big thank you to our sponsor, Ed Tech Connect. Ed Tech Connect is free, so anyone with the .edu email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. So visit EdTechConnect.com and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today. And while you're online, take a few minutes to leave our podcast a five star review. It will help other colleges and universities find us and learn from the great experts we have on the show.

Cheryl Broom (31m 54s):
That's it for now. Until next time.