#21 GA4 feature we need to see in 2022 (with George Mendham)

[00:00:17] **Dan:** Hello, and thanks for joining us in The Measure Pod, a podcast for analytics enthusiasts. If you've listened to this before, you'll notice I'm not Dara. He's on holiday for a few weeks so I'll be taking the reins, bringing in a few people to chat shop with over the next couple of weeks. I'm Dan, I'm an analytics consultant at Measurelab. And today I've brought in George, a colleague of mine also at Measurelab, who is here to talk to us about GA4. George, it's good to have you on the pod mate.

[00:00:43] **George:** Yeah, hi Dan. Thanks for having me.

[00:00:44] **Dan:** I like to always start a conversation with people that work in the analytics industry, just to find out a bit of the story about how you got here. I've always found that it's a really interesting question to ask when meeting people in this industry because no one ever really studies analytics, it's always an interesting route that people take. So George, tell us about how you found yourself where you are today.

[00:01:05] **George:** So mine was definitely an interesting route. Some people fell into the job, I sort of just tucked and rolled. I was always good at numbers or maths, so started as an accountant. Very much from like a finance background, and then sort of decided that was really quite dull, and wanted to pursue a dream of joining the police. So I did that for like a couple of years before then finding marketing, I think it was actually a recommendation of the back of my sister-in-law. So I went to go find a marketing agency and I was hired because I was good at Excel. I then started to play with Google Analytics, Google Data Studio, Google Sheets. And found that it was something I really, really enjoyed often a lot of problem-solving. And then last year I was fortunate the find Measurelab.

[00:01:54] **Dan:** Awesome. Well, it's good to have you and definitely an interesting story by all accounts. I don't think I've ever heard of a story where someone's gone from being an accountant to a police officer, to a marketer, to then an analyst. So it very zig-zaggy, I'm going to have to pick your brains another time around all of that stuff, but for now, let's talk GA4. So George, we've been talking over the last couple of days about what's in store for GA4 this year and really thinking about what are the last couple of features that GA4 needs to reach feature parity, or even go beyond feature parity with Universal Analytics. We've got a couple of clients that are using it already as their primary source of truth. However, there are a number of clients that we work with and people that we've spoken to and heard of that still can't use it. And that's not for a lack of trying, but more because there's things that it just can't do yet, or they can't replicate their existing setup.

[00:02:45] **George:** For sure. Quite a few clients have migrated to GA4, as you said, and they've been using it day to day and it's working for them. But then I guess particularly the clients that are more reliant on GA data and perhaps they're doing more complex advanced analytics with it. They're hesitant to move over for a number of different reasons. A couple of the key features that are missing for me are just the concept of views. So within University Analytics, you obviously, you have your, uh, your account, your property, your views. And within GA4 there isn't necessarily a view, like you can't view the data, just at a data stream level very easily. Obviously you can do it with comparisons or you can do it with the exploration workspace. But it's not something that is as intuitive as in Universal Analytics.

[00:03:34] **Dan:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think views are probably one of the biggest blockers for some of the more complex or advanced set ups I've seen to moving over to using Google Analytics 4 as a primary source. Like you said, George, lots of people have got them parallel tracked, they've got it set up, they're using it to an extent, or at least they have it. But actually this is a bigger deal than convenience. There's obviously the reporting aspect that you said to just reporting on a view level or a data stream level. Like you can do that, GA4 defaults to everything, and then you can create a comparison to look at the only stream that you want to. It always defaults to everything though, which is slight frustration, but it's not impossible.

[00:04:11] **George:** I get why Google has done it though. Historically what's happened in Universal Analytics is that you would have your different properties broken down predominantly by your different sites, so your different domains. And then everyone's pain point is, ah, I need a roll-up view. And so now with GA4, what Google has done is said, okay, we'll collect all of the data, a data stream level, and then we'll aggregate it at a property level and they'll solve that issue. So that now everyone can get that roll-up view that they wanted, but actually what people were using day-to-day were those broken down views. It's not easily found within GA4.

[00:04:49] **Dan:** That's a really good point. And I think it extends beyond GA as well. One blocker that I came across recently, was around the Google Ads linking. Because you can link your GA4 property to Google Ads, which is great. And then you can share audiences, which again is also great. But also the conversions are automatically shared. So every conversion event that you have logged automatically gets shared within Google Ads to use for optimization for measurement and for whatever. But let's say I've got five websites across different countries all rolled up as different data streams into the single GA4 property. When I connect that to the Google Ads accounts, let's say I've got one Google Ads account for each country. What will happen is, the total conversions for all five websites is going to be synced with each of those Ads accounts. So I can't dynamically sync the spanish conversions to the Spanish Google Ads account and the UK conversions to the UK Google Ads accounts. It's all or nothing. And I think this is where maybe having separate properties for each of the countries and then having a separate roll-up that's maybe done outside of GA, maybe in BigQuery. Your just kind of solving problems that never existed within Universal Analytics. That's not the point of this. There are ways around it. We can hack different things, however, there's not a good enough guide or best practices around how to replicate the use of views within GA4. And it's probably good to know, we're just talking about the free version here.

[00:06:13] **George:** Yeah, and I think it's, like you said, it's like, they've updated the structure within Google Analytics, but haven't thought about how it would affect or how it would work with the other Google products. So you've mentioned Google Ads, but then also Google Search Console. So it's definitely some communication that hasn't happened between teams within Google.

[00:06:32] **Dan:** For sure.

[00:06:33] **George:** One of the other things that bugs me and I'm sure bugs a lot of other people, is that the lack of session and I'm not sure if people is calling it a product or an item, they kind of switch between the two, but as a session and a product or an item scope, custom dimension. So for quite a few clients, they can get away with the number of parameters that are available as default. I think you can have up to five item categories if I remember right. But then if you wanted to add a additional item level, custom parameter, we can't then enable that within the interface as a dimension which is just a bit restrictive in terms of its usage.

[00:07:15] **Dan:** Yeah, absolutely. It's it's been the biggest gap within GA4's data structure. There's always been the joke isn't there. There's no sessions, there's no page views, it's just an event called session\_start and event called page\_view. Which is fine, we can get behind. However, there's a lot of reporting, especially from a marketing analytics perspective, that's done at a session level. Quite often, you're paying per click. A click is more often than not a session. And so you need to understand the performance of that click. So we need to understand the performance of that session. There are things that we just can't create our own. All of this does pass through into BigQuery, by the way, if you've connected it to BigQuery, you get access to that data. So if you're a SQL analyst, then you have no problem creating session scope to dimensions and metrics based on parameters and all sorts of various things that you will find in the dataset. We're talking about the interface here, and it's a real big issue because things like creating audiences to then send into Google Ads, to remarket, find lookalike audiences, all that's done through the interface. So if it's not in the interface, we can't use it in the analysis that we're doing or the activation that we're performing.

[00:08:18] **George:** Yeah. And I mean, to challenge the point Dan, to say that it's there, it is and it isn't. Like this brings me on to a third pain point is that, although it's in the interface, it's not yet available in the Data API. So exits for example, is a metric that appears in GA4, I can say, okay, pull out exits per page. Great, I've got my exit pages. But then I can't report on that in Data Studio, it's just really, really irritating. Hopefully they'll be working on and bringing them out, but once again, it just acts as a blocker for people to adopt GA4, because there's things missing. There's things that people use day-to-day like conversion rate or average session duration that just aren't yet in the Data API. And so therefore they can't put them in Data Studio reports and therefore those KPIs that people may be reporting on, they just can't surface those insights.

[00:09:12] **Dan:** Yeah, you're absolutely right. I think the data API is probably one of the most important things for adoption. Because it's almost a stepping stone while you go through this learning curve of a new interface, a new data schema, new structure, a new everything within GA4. You can hopefully, or the idea would be, is to replace your existing Data Studio dashboards, or Looker dashboards, Tableau dashboards, whatever you're using by the API. If I can replace my dashboard like-for-like, it doesn't matter if it's Universal or GA4. And I think the transition can be slightly slower or less important about learning and adopting a new interface, a new UI.

[00:09:45] **George:** I think analysts are hungry to learn and to use new tools. Obviously painting with a broad brush stroke, but like myself and I think everyone else at Measurelab, we're quite keen to use GA4. The reason that perhaps some of our clients haven't yet migrated is that there's a knock on effect bringing in the rest of the business on board to GA4. And it's actually how they're gonna embrace the change, not necessarily how the people who are making the change, gonna embrace it. Is that how you're going to explain certain metrics that are missing. How are you gonna actually bring people onboard to this new platform. How are you going to explain that things are modeled and all of these things that you've touched on in previous episodes, but it's all of that that is going to be the blocker and not necessarily specific features.

[00:10:36] **Dan:** That's a really interesting point. It's not the analytics specialists or the analytics people you need to convince, it's the rest of the company. The first thing that we'll look at is what's missing. They'll be like, well, where's session duration, where's bounce rate.

[00:10:47] **George:** It's just the analyst, just not wanting to have to explain it. As them, not one thing to go through the two week process of, okay. Well, bounce rate wasn't a good metric anyway, and they've replaced it with engagement rate. What's engagement rate, oh, it's this. How's that different to bounce rate. Oh christ, where do I begin. It's that conversation that people don't want to have.

[00:11:07] **Dan:** Quite rightly as well, you know, it's a hard conversation to have. Um, we know, you know, we've had these conversations. Not just with each other, but with clients as well to various levels of success. But Yeah, no, going back to the point, I think, you know, the, the API is lacking some fundamental dimensions and metrics. However, it's not preventing a lot of people from using this. You can't, there are work arounds, there are calculations, there are other things you can be doing. Probably a lot of these will come back to things like using the BigQuery export. So there are different ways around getting what you need. Again, it's just these extra, maybe not so obvious steps that Universal Analytics doesn't have and will not be necessarily super obvious to people using this.

[00:11:49] **George:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:11:50] **Dan:** One of the things that I find quite frustrating in terms of a lack of feature is the ability to create custom channel groupings or edit the default channel groupings. And this is something that was half addressed in the backend of last year, where they updated the regex rules for their existing channel groupings. What we don't yet have is the ability to continue that customization, to add our own bespoke channel definitions in. But also, we don't have a way of creating an entirely new channel grouping, and these are things that I used all the time using Universal Analytics. It's not something I use day to day, but it is something that every client I've worked with have used custom channel groupings at certain points or edited the default channel groupings, and generally both. Fingers crossed that's on their roadmap, but based on the way that they half addressed it last year, I don't feel like this is something they necessarily want to do. It's just something, maybe if we keep shouting loud enough and for long enough, they might eventually cave and do for us.

[00:12:49] **George:** Is it's one of those things where it doesn't affect 95% of the people, but of the 5% of people that does use, they're the ones that are using it 95% of the time. Brings me very nicely onto a pain point of mine, Dan, which is the lack of regex within GA4. So something that I think anyone who's used, for example, the page report within Universal Analytics, where you might have thousands of rows of pages, and you want to look at ones matching a certain regex pattern, you can't within GA4. For GA4 that filter only uses a contains. And it's so irritating because it also means you can't use an exclude and it's those sort of like functionality, um, things that affect once again, the 5% of people who are actually using this tool day-to-day, but it's 95% of what they do. It's those little tweaks that really make a difference, and actually improve the UX for the people using it.

[00:13:49] **Dan:** I am with you on the frustration, there's only so much you can do with that. And I know that you can go into the explore workspace and create a new exploration, do a free form and do what you want in there. But it feels like such a long way, so many clicks to get to where you need to go. Rather than just going into the page report and the reports workspace, and just throw it in a regex, just do some quick validation of some regex that you might be using elsewhere, for example. And it's one of the things I still jump back into Universal Analytics for to be honest. Let's say I just need to see certain different types of pages over the last couple of months. I'll do that in Universal rather than GA4, uh, don't tell anyone, George. But I'll do that in Universal rather than GA4, just because of the ease of that. Not just the rejects within the search bar, but like you said, the ink to the exclude, the advanced filtering we can do there. And I know if Dara is here, I can hear him in the back of my head talking about things like weighted sorts. You know, all these different filtering and sorting mechanisms that Universal has built over many years. It feels like GA4 was just starting from scratch. And I, I don't understand why they didn't just inherit the existing functionality across when it already exists.

[00:14:56] **George:** Yeah. I mean, Google's answer is, oh, but you've got the explore workspace, but then even the explore workspace has its flaws. Like, yes we can use a filter within the explore workspace, but then even if you share that report, you can't change the date range.

[00:15:11] **Dan:** Exactly. Exactly. So, you know, there's a, there's a whole world of conversation we can have another time around the explore workspace and the intricacies and the issues and the challenges. Again, it's these work arounds there's work around, not work around. There are answers to these questions that just aren't satisfying enough. They're like, oh, but you can go over here and do this thing, and then never look at It this way and do what you need, or, you know, just

[00:15:33] **George:** It just feels more awkward.

[00:15:36] **Dan:** Yes, exactly.

[00:15:38] **George:** Everything just feels more awkward. It's like, you know, whether they is, um, puzzles where you need to move four blocks to get another one out,

[00:15:46] **Dan:** Yes.

[00:15:46] **George:** It, it feels like one of those where you're like, okay, you need to negotiate the four things just to get the answer you want. And it's like, why in Universal Analytics, it was two clicks.

[00:15:57] **Dan:** That's the thing, isn't it. We've gone from having something that was quite core to the platform for it to be a kind of afterthought or a secondary feature within GA4. It's just too easy for me to go back to Universal. It will still be less clicks and probably quicker than going into the explore workspace and create an exploration. All right, so we've kind of mentioned some of the biggest features that GA4 lacking that Universal has, that has actually preventing us from using GA4, or preventing our clients. But the last couple, I suppose, are more honorable mentions. They're things that if it does affect you, it would be the biggest deal in the world. But in the grand scheme of things is probably not as important as those previous ones. Obviously we're very biased. We are analytics people, we use this tool all the time. We're not marketers, we are not CROs, SEOs, we're using this from a pure data perspective. So apologies if this is your top priority, but maybe not so much ours. But the first one on the list is the Google Optimize integration. So Google's marketing platform likes to think of itself as a hyper-connected series of tools. The whole purpose of them being under the one roof of the Google Marketing Platform is that they are all hyper-connected and interactable and just work. However, GA4 doesn't currently have an integration to Google Optimize. So if you are CRO, or if you are doing any kind of testing on your website, you have to be using Universal Analytics. All of the data that Google Optimize uses to measure the performance and serve the experiments is based on the data connected from Google Analytics. And currently there's no option to do that from GA4. So it's a big, big, old blocker actually if you're using Google Optimize and you don't care too much about Google Analytics, of course, you're going to use Universal because you just have no choice.

[00:17:39] **George:** Yeah, and I mean, this just reiterates the point where Google Analytics has updated and it's like, okay, everyone use this new version, but then all the surrounding products that rely on Analytics aren't yet ready. Like Google Ads there's issues whereby we touched on earlier. Like you can only connect it like a proxy level Search Console, the same, and now Optimize as well. I'm just wondering how many others are they going to be? We're talking about GA4 coming up to parity in 2022, but I think realistically, we need to wait for all of the other platforms to catch up with GA4 as well. I think one thing that, um, is it another honourable mention, but it's actually something I'm quite excited about is the Measurement Protocol. This is sending offline hits back into GA. And the reason I'm excited about this, it almost contradicts what we were saying earlier, but the GA4 being user and event based, I'm quite excited to see what offline data is actually going to be imported into GA4. Cause I think what we might end up seeing is actually more products, more tools using measurement protocol because suddenly we don't need to sessionize certain things.

[00:18:54] **Dan:** Yeah, for sure. I mean, the specialization just messes everything up in Universal. And the fact that we don't have sessions as a, as a tangible object anymore, they're just those session\_start events, it does mean that we can throw all sorts of different data into the GA4 data model and for it to handle it quite happily. It'll just go into the user journey, the user timeline.

[00:19:14] **George:** For example, if you're like a subscription business whereby okay, you're tracking the purchase in Google Analytics. Hypothetically someone could cancel their subscription and that's not tracked in GA. Now, what we can do is actually push that back into GA because we know it's not going to break any session. I'm really, really excited to see how this is going to be used, but not just up to parity, but actually I think it's going to bring a whole new wave of adoption.

[00:19:41] **Dan:** Yeah, you're quite right. And again, this isn't something that doesn't exist within Universal, it's just that the GA4 one has only recently gone into beta. It was in alpha, it's now gone into beta, but we just need it to be released officially, formally and stably. So we just need this formal measurement protocol to be released as a V 1.0 and then these platforms probably will feel a bit more confident about building integrations with it, to use it more long-term and transition their Universal Analytics, measurement protocol integration over to GA4's one.

[00:20:11] **George:** Yeah, and this brings us on quite nicely to the next point around the Admin API. Cause obviously within the Appian API, you can bulk edit a number of different things like audiences, like custom dimensions, et cetera. And if you're making these sometimes like hundreds of changes, you do that by the admin API, because it can just be like a flick of a switch. Whereas currently the admin API doesn't exist within GA4, it's just got to be done all manually, which is just once again, for the 5% of people that it's going to affect, it's going to be an absolute pain point and ruin the day.

[00:20:51] **Dan:** Exactly. It's going to be for that 5% of the users that might use this, it probably saves them hundreds of hours a month, which is great. Um, you know, trying to set up 200 properties with data streams and custom dimensions and updating all the property settings. The whole purpose there is to save all of that stress and save time. Ultimately save time for the people doing the legwork. And without it, it means we're back to clicking one by one, setting up everything, we might make mistakes. So I think this is it. Again, other systems that people have built to utilize bulk management of Google Analytics and the features within it, we need an Admin API for those people to migrate over to it.

[00:21:32] **George:** Yeah, and another one Dan is store visit. So something that not many people use or know about. But this is actually the tracking of the visits to brick and mortar stores. I'm sure it will come, at least I hope it's going to come. But it's something that does not yet exist within GA4, but it does exist within UA.

[00:21:50] **Dan:** You're absolutely right, good spot. Although you do have to jump through hoops to get it turned on in the first place within Universal. And then, you know, there's always question marks around the quality of the data and how it works, but it's, it's one of these Google black box, Google tracks, everything and knows everything and it gives us a little glimpse into that black box occasionally. It's actually a really interesting set of reports. If you have shops and you haven't got these reports turned on in Universal, I'll put a link in the show notes around the kind of process you can go through to make sure you can turn it on. Alright, thanks George, that's been a really, really interesting chat. And although we've been chatting about this for a couple of weeks, it's really good just to go through it.

[00:22:25] **George:** That was great. It almost felt like a therapy session.

[00:22:29] **Dan:** This is exactly why I use this for. I just get to rant about GA4. So thanks, George. Let me just try and recap this chat. Ultimately this is the year where we foresee Google Analytics 4 to reach feature parity and exceed Universal Analytics. So if you're not currently using GA4 now is the time to start parallel tracking right now. The couple of things that we've identified that GA4 absolutely needs to reach feature parity are views, or an equivalent replacement of, or at least best practice around how to replace a complex view structure. Session, and product scope, custom dimensions and metrics, they are a must. Finish adding everything into the Data API. I know it will be a moving needle as you add more stuff into GA4, but let's finish the basics. And just for me, please update that Sheets connector so that we can use GA4, if you are listening that is Google. Thank you, thank you. For me, my biggest thing is about custom channel groupings and editable channel groupings. And on that, George, you said about the lack of regex availability within the reports workspace, and just in general, the custom filtering, the include exclude, all of those things just don't exist currently. And then, further down the list, we had a couple of honorable mentions. So the Google Optimize integration is just doesn't exist. The Admin API doesn't exist and measurement protocol, although it does exist, it's currently in beta and we'd need that to be stable, to really start building out solutions using it. Well, George on the podcast, we like to end the show with an escape route from analytics. What do you do to get away from it all, what do you do to escape from the world of analytics?

[00:24:07] **George:** Over the Christmas break, my brother recommended the Witcher to me. There's something I've not watched on Netflix, but I've got into, and it it's hooked me. I think I'm currently about halfway through season two, I think. Um, and it's really, really good.

[00:24:28] **Dan:** Well, good effort. Yeah. What a great TV show. Have you played the games or read the books by any chance?

[00:24:32] **George:** No, I know that there is the game and I'm tempted to buy it, but I feel like that might be dangerous. And then I might not come back to work after the Christmas break.

[00:24:44] **Dan:** Well, definitely Witcher 3 is the, the big one, the at least the most recent and that's hundreds of hours worth of gaming right there. So I highly recommend it, but maybe not if you're someone like me that will drop everything else and spend those hundreds of hours on it until it's done.

[00:25:00] **George:** What about you, what have you been up to you?

[00:25:03] **Dan:** Well, for me George, I have been furniture shopping. I am in the process of moving house. Um, we're downsizing slightly from the house we're currently in. So unfortunately, or I suppose, fortunately, whichever way you look at it, a lot of that furniture won't fit in the new house. So it's given us an excuse to go furniture shopping, and we're looking at tables, chairs, sofas, all of that stuff.

[00:25:25] **George:** So anyone interested in secondhand furniture should get in touch at podcast@measurelab.co.uk.

[00:25:32] **Dan:** All right. Great, thanks George. Appreciate being on the show. That's it for this week, this is our first episode back in 2022. And, you'll find more about us over measurelab.co.uk. You can get in touch with us via email at podcast@measurelab.co.uk, or find myself George or Dara over on LinkedIn and drop us a message. If you want to suggest a topic for us to talk about, or if you want to join us on The Measure Pod and come bring your chosen topic or opinion to us, feel free just reach out via that email address or via LinkedIn. So join us next time, we'll be back next week with more analytics chit-chat. I've been Dan joined by George, so it's bye from me.

[00:26:14] **George:** And bye from me.

[00:26:15] **Dan:** See you next time.

[00:26:33] **Dan:** I have no, you can't ask me those questions. I make up half the words I say anyway.