can-do digital marketing

In collaboration with Opteo

THE STATE OF PAID MEDIA 2026

The year of stronger strategy, braver decisions, and harnessing the human side of automation.












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A new era for Paid Media

Paid media has never stood still, but the pace in 2026 feels *different.*

Remember when you just bought a keyword and an ad showed up? Ah, the good old days. Now, search behaviour is shifting, platforms are fragmenting, automation is tightening its grip on campaign decisions, and AI is starting to influence everything from creative to attribution. For many teams, it's become harder than ever to understand what's working, why it's working, and what they should actually be doing next.

That's exactly why this State of Paid Media 2026 report exists.

We weren't interested in adding to the noise or giving you a load of corporate "blah." We wanted the real story. So, we've rounded up a cracking group of folk who are actually in the trenches every day, the ones tinkering with the machinery of paid search, social, and programmatic. You won't find any airy fairy future gazing here. These are grounded, no-nonsense views from agency owners, growth gurus, and the names you'll recognise from the front lines of PPC.

The goal is simple: helping you make your accounts actually turn a decent profit.

We asked every contributor one thing: What's going to define this next chapter? Their answers are blunt, brilliant, and in a few cases, a proper wake-up call. You'll see the same things cropping up, AI-assisted buying, the platforms taking over the "black box" of optimisation, and our data seemingly disappearing into thin air.

As automation continues to reshape paid media, many advertisers are looking more closely at independent technology partners that are designed to align with their interests rather than the platforms. This ebook has been created in collaboration with Opteo, whose work focuses on helping marketers add guardrails to automation and improve visibility over areas such as rising CPCs, irrelevant search activity, and higher risk placements. Happy to introduce you to them if you want to find out more.

For us at Can-Do though, we aren't claiming to have a crystal ball. We just wanted to give you a heads-up on the forces shaping 2026, where the wins are, and which potholes you'll want to swerve. Whether you're running the accounts yourself or leading a big team, this ebook is here to help you think a bit sharper and act a bit braver.

A massive cheers to every contributor who shared their secrets. Our industry is only as good as the folk in it, and this lot are top-tier.

Right then, let's get stuck in, shall we?



Chris Nightingale
Founder

Executive Summary

If you're a skim reader or CEO without the time to delve into the technical detail, this is the page for you.

Here's a sharp overview of the juicy content in this book

The traditional search contract has expired. As query lengths explode into natural language prompts, the industry is shifting from shorthand keywords to conversational intent and multi-modal discovery. With the rise of visual search spikes and zero-click commerce, platforms are evolving into answer engines where AI agents facilitate transactions directly within the interface. This has collapsed channel silos, making product feed health more vital than landing page SEO and creating a human premium for verified, authentic content in a sea of generic AI noise.

The single biggest friction point in the industry is the clash between Platform Efficiency and Business Profitability. Platforms are designed to maximise their own yield. AI-driven campaigns (PMax, Advantage+) will scale spend into terrible inventory if not strictly governed.

The winner in 2026 is the Human Orchestrator: The marketer who uses AI for the heavy lifting of versioning and bidding, but applies a strategic layer of brand nuance, psychological hooks, and financial guardrails that a machine cannot replicate.

It's all about predictable growth. Having campaigns setup in a structured way that clearly identities and predicts growth opportunities is going to be the winner for brands, instead of setting up PMAX or Demand Gen blindly and then wondering why on earth performance fluctuates heavily from week to week.

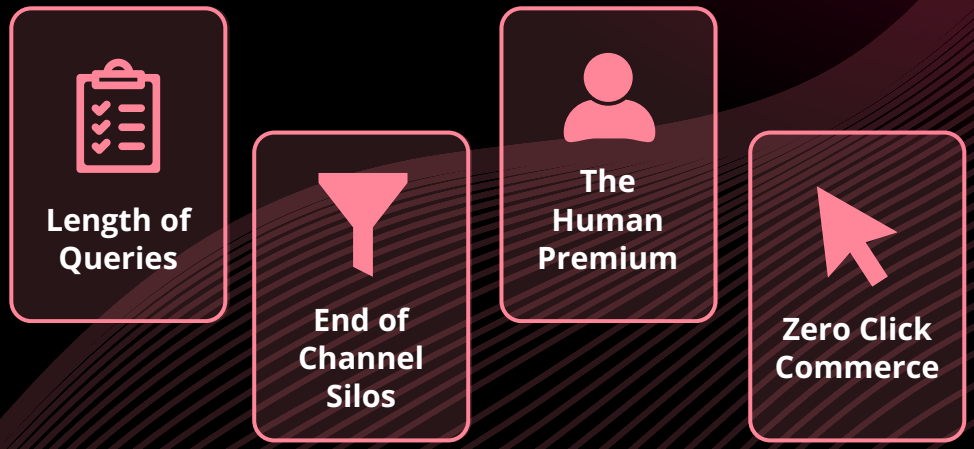
What's changing in paid media:

Length of queries - We must move away from a one-keyword-to-one-ad mentality. Success now comes from Intent-Based Themes supported by broad match and deep audience signals.

End of channel silos - The traditional marketing funnel has collapsed into a connected growth ecosystem where search, social, and retail media must be managed as a single, platform-agnostic unit. Success now requires an Orchestrator approach, using unified data and consistent creative to follow the consumer journey across platforms rather than managing isolated channel silos.

The human premium - The human premium is the editorial layer. While AI versions 50 ads in seconds, a human must decide which one has the "soul" or "cultural hook" to actually stop the scroll.

Zero click commerce - In 2026, the traditional website visit is often bypassed as AI agents and answer engines facilitate product discovery and checkout directly within the search results. This shift to zero click commerce means success is no longer measured by site traffic, but by your brand's ability to provide structured, authoritative data that allows AI to complete transactions on the user's behalf.



What Last Year Taught Us:

Huge changes in how and where we search

If 2024 was the year of AI experimentation, 2025 was the year the user behavior actually broke. For twenty years, the contract between a user and a search engine was static: I type a keyword, you give me ten blue links, I choose one.

2025 taught us that this contract has expired. We witnessed a fundamental inversion in the search dynamic. Users are no longer "hunting" for information by stringing together awkward keywords (e.g., "best running shoes miami cheap"). They are communicating.

Here is what the data and the platforms told us this year:

We Are Searching Less, But Asking More

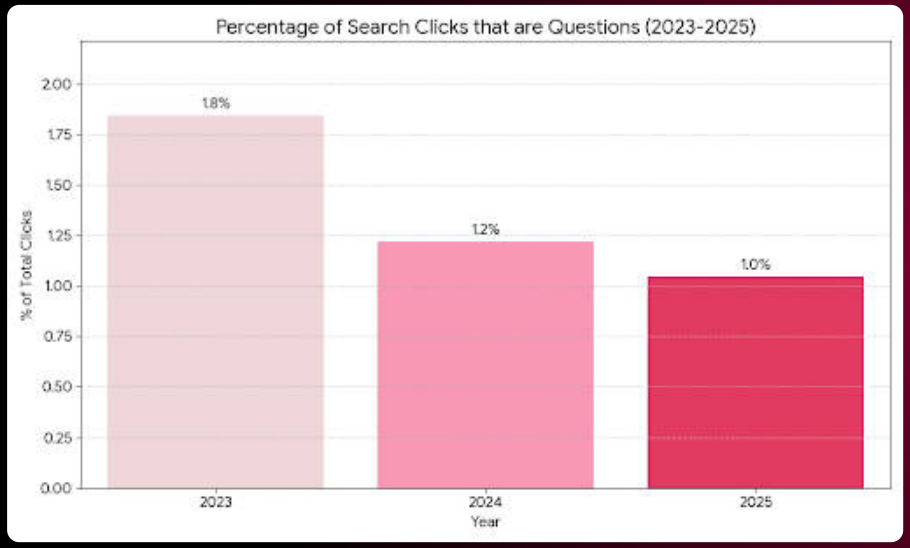
The total volume of traditional "search queries" is softening for the first time in history, but the volume of questions is exploding.

The 'Answer Engine' Shift:

With Gemini being heavily pushed, users have stopped treating Google like a library index and started treating it like an oracle. With the maturity of AI Overviews (formerly SGE) and competitors like ChatGPT and Perplexity, users expect the answer to the question, not a link to the answer.

15% of daily queries in Google have never been searched before, and many will never be seen again.

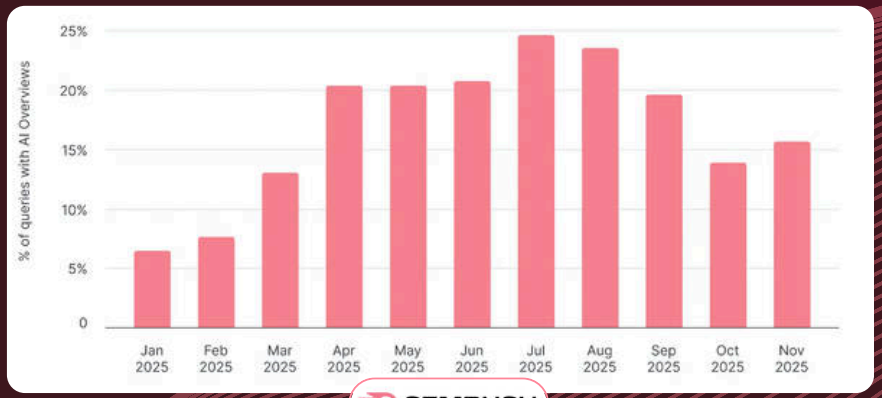
Over the last few years, the number of clicks on question based keywords have dropped, primarily down to users getting answers through these AI Overviews.

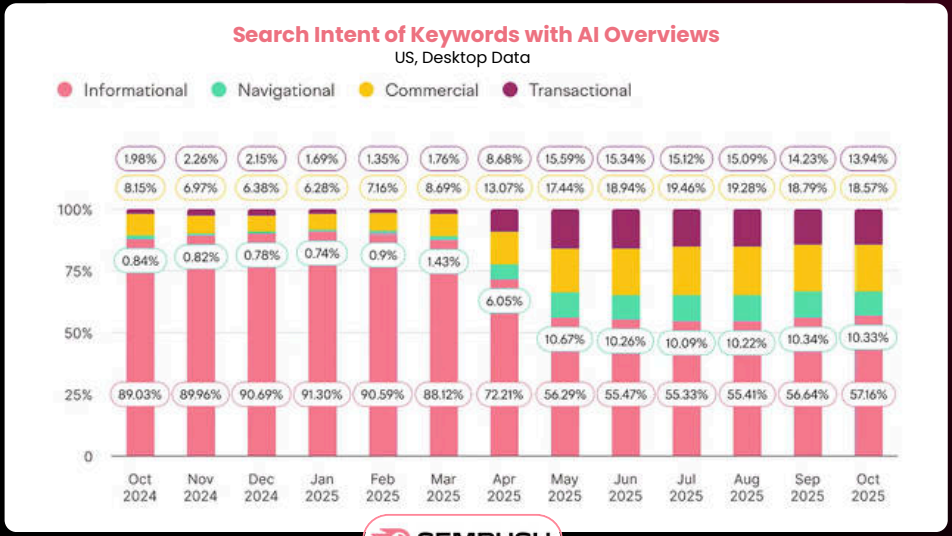


As a % mix, more results are triggering AI overviews too, peaking at nearly 25% in July according to SEM Rush. With an increasing mix towards showing even on transactional and commercial terms.

Share of Keywords Triggering AI Overviews (Jan-Nov 2025)

US, Desktop Data

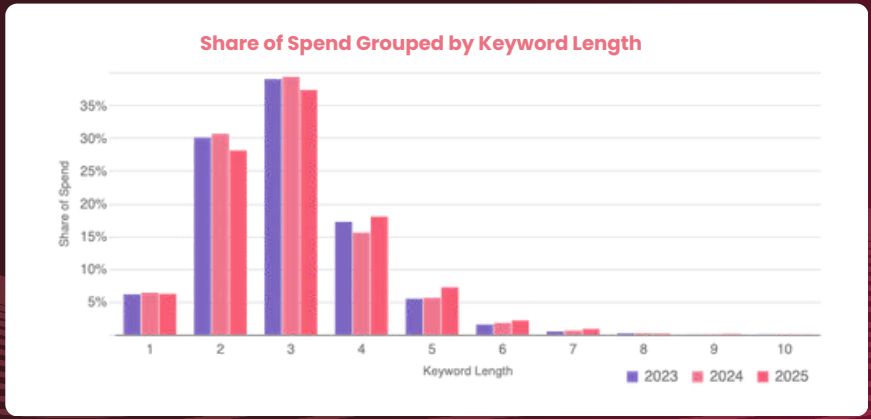




We Stopped Typing Keywords

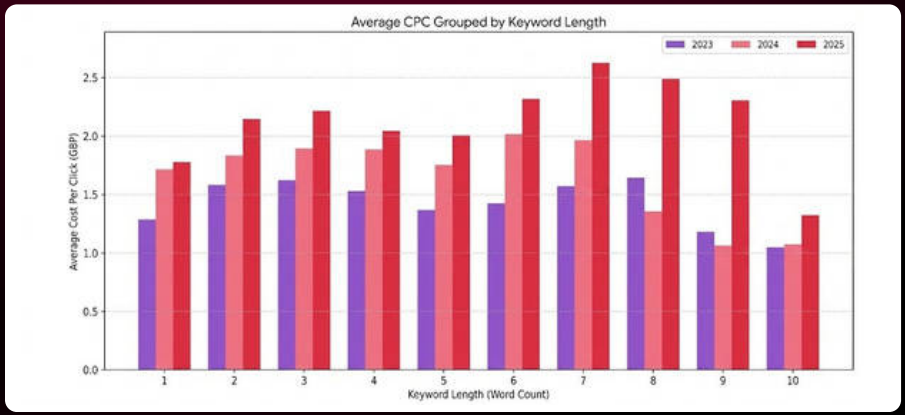
For the PPC advertiser, the keyword has been the atomic unit of account structure since the inception of AdWords. 2025 taught us that keywords are now just signals, not commands.

Voice search and dictation have normalized long-tail, conversational inputs. We aren't seeing 3-word queries anymore; we are seeing a hell of a lot more 15-word queries. People are comfortable having a conversion with Google more often, with the confidence it'll know exactly what they're looking for.

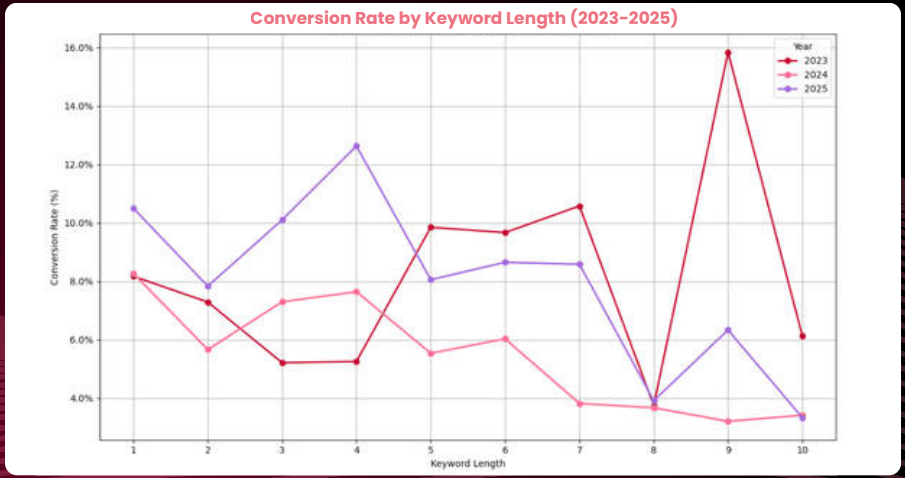


Users are speaking to platforms as if they were human assistants. The query "plumber denver" is being replaced by "Who can fix a burst pipe in LoDo right now without charging me a fortune?" Imagine the almost mathematically infinite variations of natural language there are, meaning we are to rely more so on broad match that ever before.

At the same time, CPCs across the board are trending upwards, even across 7+worded queries, a trend we've never seen before. The sweet spot lies around the 5 word mark.



Conversions for longer search don't see the same levels of conversion rates, as the thought behind these queries is that they are more likely to be information, and answered by Google's AI Overview.



The Platforms Pivot: Who Over What

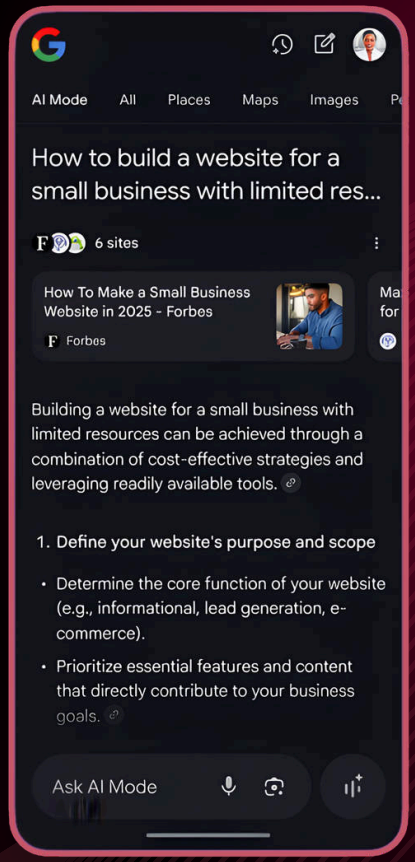
Perhaps the biggest lesson of 2025 was the aggressive pivot by Google and Microsoft Ads away from syntax and toward identity.

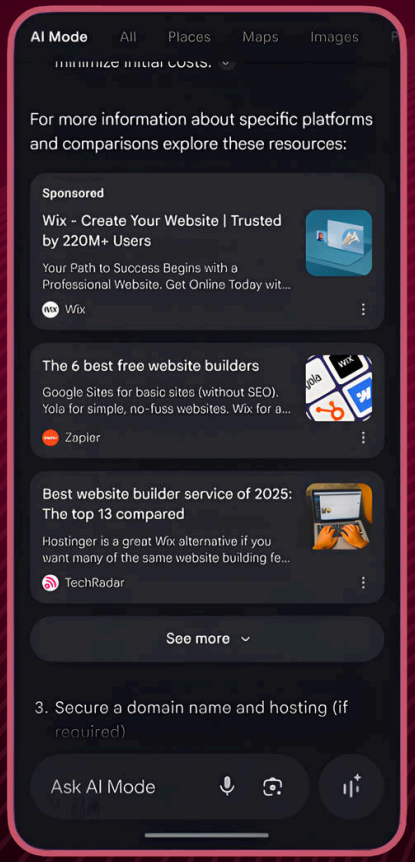
For years, PPC was about intercepting a user based on what they typed. Now, the platforms are telling us explicitly: It matters less what they type, and more who they are.

The "Meta-fication" of Search Ads: Google Ads has effectively adopted the Meta (Facebook) model. They are urging advertisers to feed them "Audience Signals", customer lists, pixel data, converters, and let the AI find people like that, regardless of the specific search term they use.

Broad Match is the AI's Playground: Last year was the year Google finally forced the industry's hand on Broad Match. By pairing Broad Match with Smart Bidding, the engine looks at the context of the user (their history, their location, their recent purchases) rather than just the text of their query.

If you are still restricting your campaigns to a tight list of Exact Match keywords, you aren't being precise - you are being invisible to the 15% of daily searches that are brand new, conversational, and driven by audience intent rather than keyword syntax.





Action List:

- **Broaden out match types (without rinsing budget!)**
- **Get to grips with PMAX, Demand Gen and audience first campaign types (these will be crucial for AI Mode ads!)**

The 5 Biggest Opportunities For Brands In 2026

1.The Strategic Shift to AI-Assisted Performance

In 2026, the brands winning the market have moved away from manual lever-pulling and toward high-level orchestration. We have entered an era where we no longer just manage keywords; we manage a complex ecosystem of automated intent, where the quality of our inputs, data and creative, determines the profitability of the outputs.

The New Ad Frontier: PMax, Gemini, and ChatGPT

The Black Box of Performance Max (PMax) and Demand Gen has matured into the primary engine for cross-channel growth. However, 2026 marks a historic shift with the official rollout of Ads across Gemini and the launch of the ChatGPT ad exchange. In these conversational environments, your brand isn't just a banner; it's a cited source or a "Helpful Suggestion" within a live dialogue.

To survive this shift, your Product Feeds must be in pristine condition. Because AI agents read your data to decide if you are a worthy recommendation, your feed is now your brand's resume.

Move beyond basic titles to Semantic Enrichment. Ensure your attributes answer specific user problems (e.g., changing "18V Drill" to "Cordless 18V Drill for Heavy-Duty Masonry and Concrete"). If your data is thin, you will be invisible to conversational search.

Human-Led, AI-Assisted Creative at Scale

The creative workflow has been revolutionised by Nano Banana Pro, now baked directly into the Google Ads interface. Whilst there will be a lot of low-quality AI creative floating around, this should mean that those with a human-led approach will stand out and allow the human premium to shine. Humans provide the emotional hook and strategic direction, while AI handles the heavy lifting of versioning and technical execution.

Quick Fire Iteration: Take a single human designed concept and use AI to generate 50 brand-aligned variations in seconds. You are no longer looking for one perfect ad; you are building a Creative System that evolves based on real-time performance data.

Use human insight to define the why (the pain point or aspiration), then use Nano Banana to solve the how (the lighting, the background, the framing). This ensures you maintain brand soul while achieving the creative velocity required to combat ad fatigue in 2026.

2.Profit-First, Platform-Agnostic Measurement

In 2026, blindly trusting ad platform dashboards is setting you up for failure. With the rise of modeled conversions, platforms like Google and Meta are essentially grading their own homework, often claiming credit for the same sale. The opportunity lies in moving away from a single source of truth and adopting a strategy of Measurement Triangulation. This means balancing platform data with **Marketing Efficiency Ratio (MER)** to gauge total cash-in vs. cash-out, and utilising accessible Marketing Mix Modeling (MMM) to understand the incremental lift of top-of-funnel channels that last-click attribution ignores.

To execute this, you need infrastructure that bridges the gap between your bank account and your ad manager. Tools like **TripleWhale** with its Triple Pixel and **ProfitMetrics** with their Conversion Booster allow you to bypass the signal loss of standard browser pixels. By feeding real-time 'Net Profit' data (rather than just top-line revenue) back into Google and Meta via server-side connections, you essentially train the AI to ignore low value window shoppers and hunt exclusively for your highest-margin customers.

The smartest brands have abandoned ROAS in favor of POAS (Profit on Ad Spend). Revenue is a vanity metric; profit pays the bills. In an era of AI automation, if you feed algorithms revenue data, they will find the easiest way to generate sales - often selling your lowest-margin products to your existing customers. By integrating Cost of Goods Sold (COGS) and return rates directly into your data feed, you can train AI bidding strategies to hunt for contribution margin, ensuring every ad dollar spent actually improves the bottom line.

3.Diversification beyond Google

In 2026, relying solely on Google is a vulnerability due to rising CPCs and platform saturation. The immediate 'easy win' remains **Microsoft Advertising**, which offers a low-friction path to incremental revenue. With seamless campaign import tools, brands can easily capture Microsoft's older, more affluent demographic and leverage unique LinkedIn targeting for B2B precision - often at a significantly lower CPA than Google.

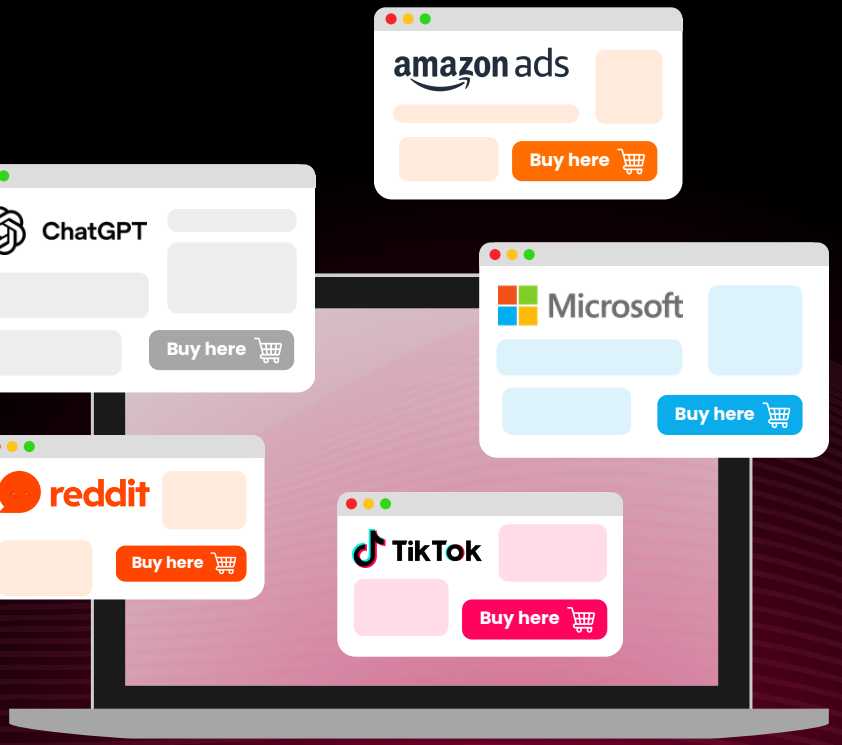
True diversification, however, requires following the shift in user behavior. **TikTok** has evolved into a primary search engine for discovery, while **Reddit** has become the trust engine for users seeking authentic human verification away from AI noise. **Amazon Ads** now allows non-endemic brands to leverage unparalleled purchase-intent data. A robust 2026 strategy uses these channels not just for reach, but to feed the top of the funnel and capture demand where it actually originates.

And don't forget, this year will be the year of **ChatGPT ads**!

4.Smarter first-party data usage

In 2026, first-party data is no longer just an audience list for retargeting; it is the primary training manual for AI bidding. Old ways of usage is simply counting every form fill as a success. Smart usage requires connecting the dots between an anonymous click and a confirmed sale. Tools like WhatConverts are essential here, capturing the GCLID (Google Click ID) alongside every phone call, chat, or form submission. This creates a bridge between your ad spend and your CRM, preserving the critical data link that privacy changes try to break.

Once that link is established, the real power comes from the feedback loop. By feeding the value of closed deals back into Google Ads via these GCLIDs (Offline Conversion Import), you stop optimizing for cheap "leads" and start optimising for actual revenue. This signals the algorithm to ignore low quality browsers and hunt exclusively for the specific user behaviors that result in money in the bank. In a privacy-first world, this closed-loop data is the only competitive advantage that platforms cannot automate away for your competitors.



5.Faster isn't always better, show you care

In the traditional playbook of digital marketing, speed was the ultimate deity - shave off a millisecond, save a conversion. But as we move through 2026, we're discovering that instant can sometimes feel cheap or even uncalculated to a sophisticated consumer. Take the example of a high-intent quiz: when results for complex product recommendations load in 0.2 seconds, the user's subconscious scoffs, "They didn't actually look at my answers." However, when brands build in "wasted" seconds, using a progress bar that breathes and flashes messages like "Analysing your skin type" or "Cross-referencing 500 combinations" - conversion rates actually climb in the client I've tested this on. This is the Labor Illusion in action. By forcing a moment of friction, you aren't just giving them an answer; you're proving you did the work to find the right answer.

In the context of 2026 Google Ads and PPC, here are a few ways that slowing down can outperform the instant click:

5a. The Algorithm Reveal on Landing Pages

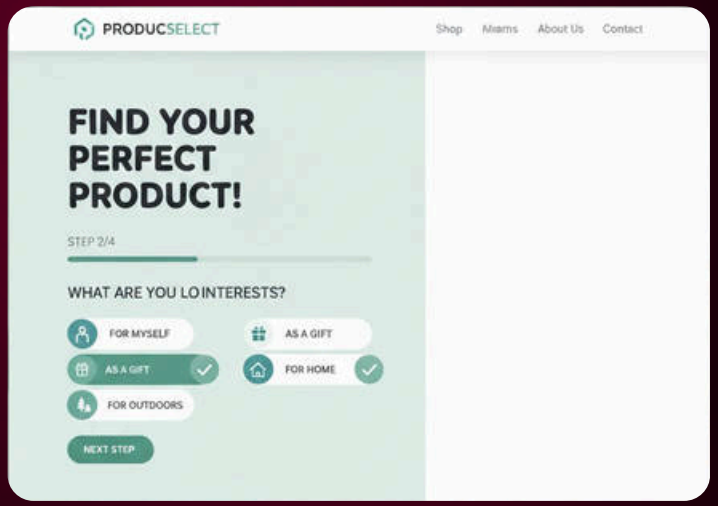
Instead of a standard landing page that simply exists, use a pre-entry sequence. When a user clicks your PPC ad for a complex service (like custom insurance or high-end B2B software), show a 3 second "Optimisation Screen" that dynamically references their search term. It shifts the perception from "I clicked a generic ad" to "This system is tailoring itself to my specific query right now."

5b. High Friction Lead Gen

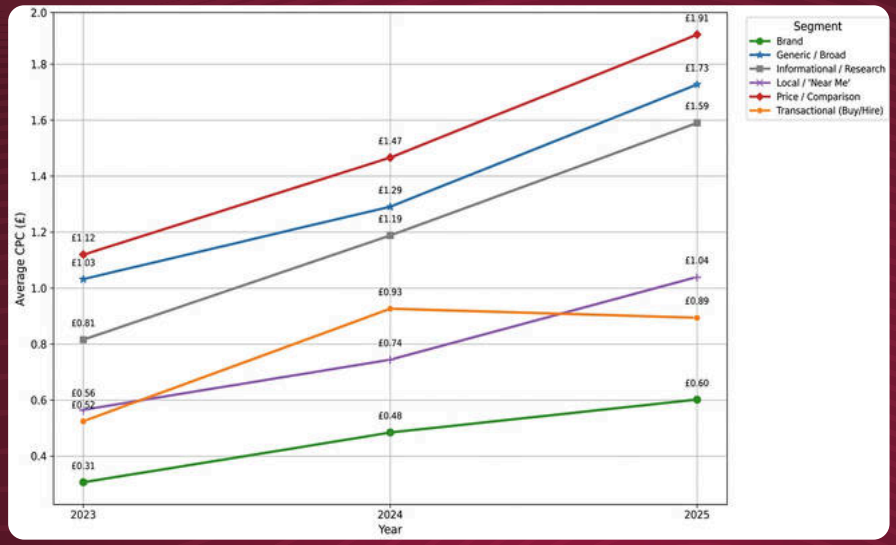
In 2026, AI can fill out forms instantly, leading to a flood of low-quality leads. By adding deliberate friction - such as a multi-step interactive calculator or a "Confirm your intent" slide, you disqualify the bored clickers and signal to the high-value prospects that your solution is bespoke. While your CVR might look lower on paper, your Lead-to-Close rate skyrockets because the user has invested time into the process.

5c. The Curation Buffer for E-commerce

If you are running Shopping Ads for a large catalog, try a 'Selection in Progress' animation after the user selects a filter. Instead of the products flickering into view instantly, let them cascade in after a brief pause that highlights the curation. It mimics the feeling of a personal shopper going to the back room to find the good stuff, increasing the perceived value of the items displayed.



Evolution of Avg. CPC Query Segment (2023-2025)



The Industry Landscape

The UK digital advertising industry in 2026 is forecast to see £45 billion in total spend and an 82% digital share that underscores a market that is not just mature, but also intensely efficient.

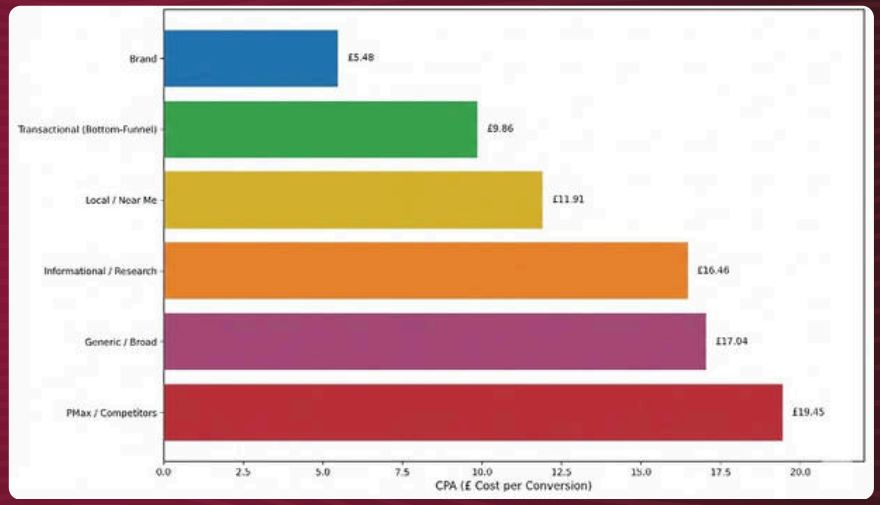
I mashed together all of the data I have access to and It's no surprise that **brand traffic is still the efficiency champion** with an average CPA of £5.48; these users already know you and are effectively presold. As we move into the Transactional and Local segments, costs nudge up to the £10-£12 range because you're fighting for users who are ready to buy but haven't fully committed to you yet. This represents your core performance layer - high intent without the heavy price tag of completely cold outreach.

The costs spike highest with Informational, Generic, and PMax segments, hitting near £20, but that is exactly where your growth comes from. You are paying a premium here to interrupt new audiences and steal market share from competitors.

If you didn't invest in these expensive top-of-funnel clicks now, you wouldn't have anyone searching for your cheap Brand terms later.

It's the price of admission - you have to buy the awareness now to bank on the loyalty later.

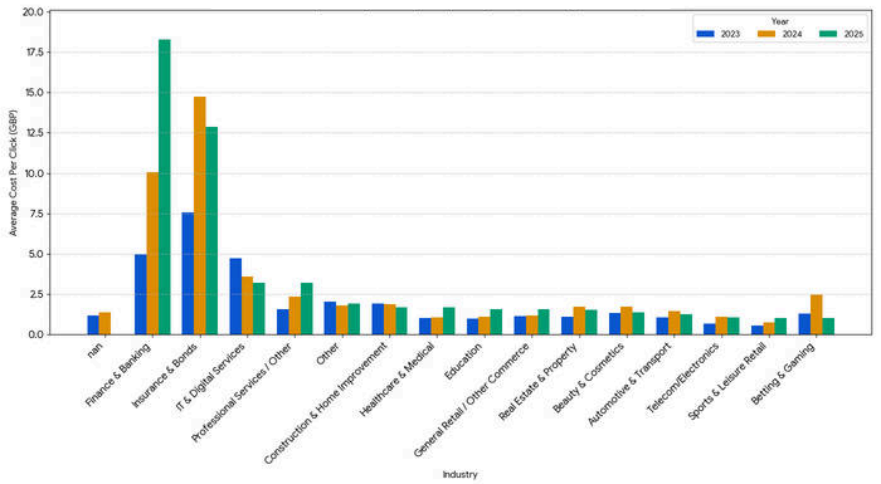
Cost Per Acquisition (CPA) by Refined Segment



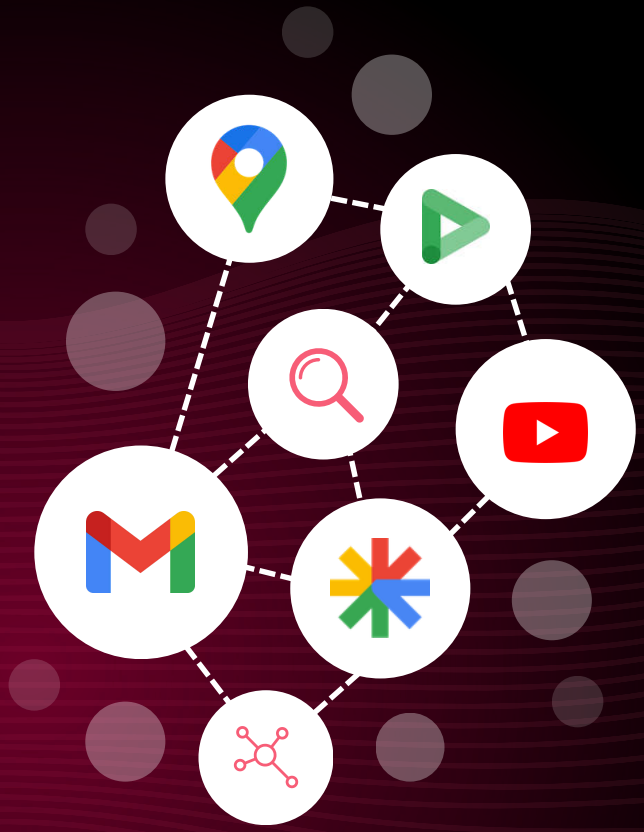
When it comes to the competitive landscape within these spaces, Finance and Banking has seen a really rough year with CPCs jumping from £10 in 2024 to over £17.50 on average in 2025. No other sector has seen the same level of growth, with Insurance & Bonds being knocked to the second most expensive category.

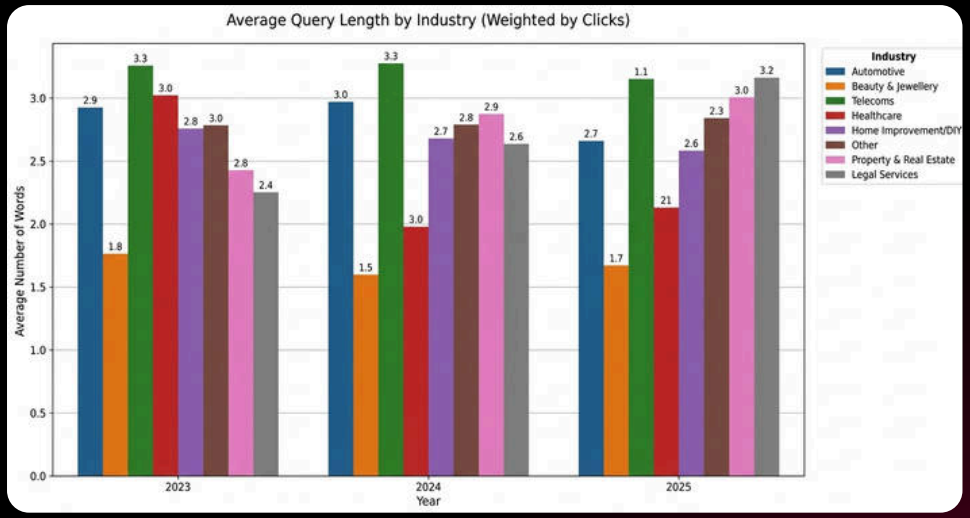
The other outlier here is across Betting & Gaming, dropping YoY to become a cheap source of clicks for advertisers. To caveat here, this CPC graph masks changes to account setup so it's likely that players in this space are adopting PMAX & Demand Gen at a greater scale.

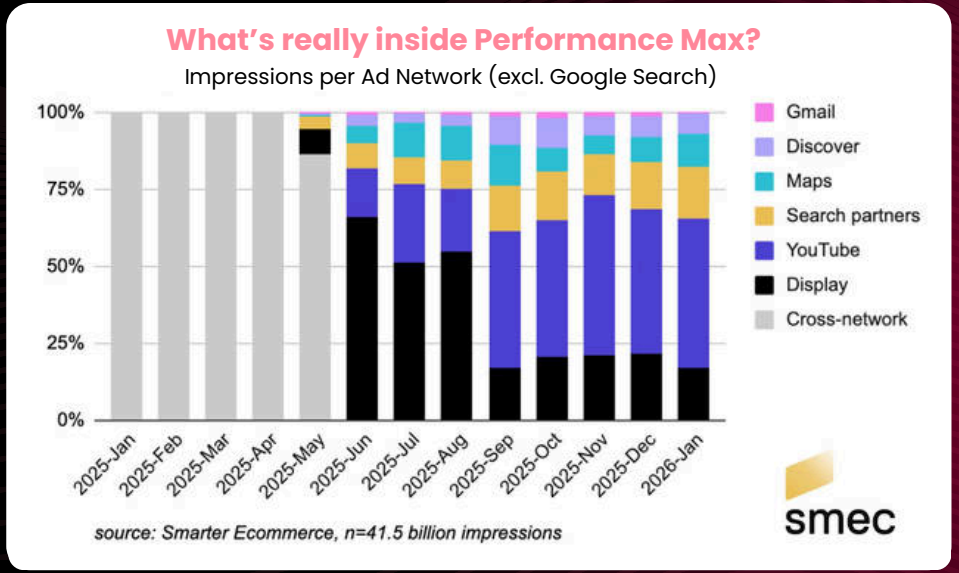
Average CPC by Industry Grouped by Year (Sorted by 2025 Cost)



We're seeing big swings in the channels being utilised in PMAX too. It's come on leaps and bounds but as reported by SMEC, a huge number of impressions now come from YouTube. As many of you will know, if you don't feature any video assets in a Performance Max campaign, Google will create their own (terrible) version, stitching together image assets with questionable music. Since you can't easily exclude without pestering a high up Google rep, the best way to combat this is to always include high quality, engaging videos in PMAX.









Stephen Kenwright

Consultant & Non-Exec Director

Stephen is a consultant and non-executive director, making growth feel easier for marketing agencies. He founded SEARCH-FIRST creative agency Rise at Seven in 2019, growing annual revenues to more than £7m; hiring 110 staff; opening offices in Sheffield, Manchester, London and New York; and winning more than 70 industry awards - about one every two weeks - before exiting after three years. Stephen held board positions at digital marketing agency Branded3, which he helped to merge into consultancy Kin + Carta PLC after its initial acquisition; and content agency Ride Shotgun. He was also Head of Digital at £4.7bn turnover automotive retailer Pendragon PLC.

"Clients might be spending a higher percentage of their budgets on performance, but that's coming with shorter contract terms and longer payment terms."

The Great Budget Pivot: Why Global Anxiety is Fueling the Performance Media Boom

We're right to be thinking about how the AI arms race is going to impact paid media in the future but, right now, it's not the only market force we should be considerate of. In the UK, the effects of international trade policy (particularly from the US); wars in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere; and ongoing fallout from COVID; have all been compounded by an extended government campaign to keep expectations low before the Autumn Statement.

The result is a mood that's even more anxious than elsewhere in Europe and, as a result, clients haven't been willing to commit to much of anything in the last several months. We see this in the lengthening sales cycles in our CRMs and the emails that go unanswered...as well as in the paid media jobs market which is, apparently, booming.

"In times of uncertainty - and with clients generally looking to cut costs where possible - the flexibility that comes with performance media is pretty attractive. This is especially true in 2025/26 when, for the first time in a decade, there's little consensus on how organic media should work (Google vs. LLMs vs. Reddit, TikTok, YouTube and social search engines; PR vs. link building) and more decision paralysis within client organisations about a usually fairly steady and reliable channel in the form of organic search.

The average B2B buying group involves 6 to 10 stakeholders, and the number of stakeholders has more than doubled in 10 years (from 5 to over 11 today).

Source, Martal: https://martal.ca/what-is-a-b2b-buyer-lb/

Businesses in general are more nervous about committing to anything long term, so budgets are shifting towards performance media and more companies are hiring PPC and paid social talent as a result, with less new hires in SEO an inevitable consequence. Contractors, consultants and agencies are benefitting most, as client organisations are less willing to commit to the fixed costs of an in-house department...agencies should be wary, though. Clients might be spending a higher percentage of their budgets on performance, but that's coming with shorter contract terms and longer payment terms.

Because of this, I'd recommend that agencies and contractors focus on their own brands, both in terms of salience and differentiation: we need clients to view our agency as the only agency suitable for specifically them, which means taking some brave decisions about where to specialise and how to make sure we're recognised in an ever more crowded marketplace. Most challenges with payment terms and shorter contracts come back to a weaker position going into the new business process, where we're viewed as one of many - not the only reasonable choice."

74.6%

of B2B sales to new customers take at least 4 months to close, with nearly half (46.4%) taking 7 months or more.

Source, Ruh: https://www.ruh.ai/blogs/sales-cycle-2025-guide-shorter-b2b-deals



Sophie Logan

PPC Specialist

Sophie is a PPC Specialist with over 11 years of experience in the marketing industry. Passionate about all things Lead Gen, she has a particular interest in B2B and SaaS brands. She is also a dedicated public speaker, a Diamond Google Ads Product Expert, a regular contributor to Search Engine Land and a Girls in Marketing mentor.

"As tasks become automated... we should use this opportunity to focus on supporting and optimising the post-click experience."

Redefining the PPC Remit:
Why automation is the catalyst for PPC specialists to take ownership of the full user journey

As PPC Specialists, we'll continue to see tasks that once consumed large portions of our time become automated or removed from our control altogether. As a result, our time will increasingly be freed up. I believe that we should use this opportunity to focus on supporting and optimising the post-click experience, ensuring that our PPC traffic is directed to landing pages and user journeys we feel confident in.

Whilst some may argue that what happens after a PPC visitor lands on site is beyond our remit, I believe we have the insights and audience understanding to support the post-click experience. Through analysing their wants, needs, terminology and online behaviour to shape our ad copy and targeting, we have gained valuable context. This context can enable us to ensure that the landing page speaks directly to their motivations and needs, and support them as they progress through the sales cycle.

Furthermore, we can continue to support users even after they've become customers to help encourage loyalty and retention, through PPC campaigns that upsell, promote new features/business announcements or referral offers.

Practical Advice

Use Microsoft Clarity:
It's an incredibly easy way to get a thorough understanding of how people are engaging with your landing pages and start optimising them. Best of all, it's free!

Book in a chat with your sales team:
If you're working on a lead gen account, get a meeting booked in with the sales team and ask them for more insights about what pain points and use cases they are hearing about the most. You can then use this to help better tailor your targeting and messaging to reach the right audience.

Make sure you've added image assets:
They're a fantastic way to help your ads stand out in Search results, yet many accounts still overlook them. If you've met the eligibility criteria, ensure you're adding them in and taking full advantage of this awesome feature.



Charley Brennand

Founder, Performance MCR

Charley Brennand is a performance marketing consultant working across large retail organisations including CDS Group, JD Sports, Debenhams, Domino's to name a few. She specialises in aligning paid media with commercial reality - bridging the gap between finance, product and performance teams to drive profitable growth. She is also the founder of Performance MCR, a practitioner-led paid media conference born and bred in Manchester.

"Technical skill gets you in the door, but emotional regulation and commercial literacy keep you there."

The Calm Operator Advantage:
Why Soft Skills Will Define Paid Media in 2026

For years, paid media rewarded technical excellence.

Platform knowledge
Campaign structure
Automation mastery

But inside large organisations, performance marketing no longer sits neatly inside a channel box. It sits in the middle of finance, trading, product, agency delivery and board scrutiny.

Which means the job has changed. The biggest performance failures I see in complex organisations are not technical failures.

They are behavioural ones.

Talented PPC specialists walk into large businesses and:

- Talk in platform language instead of commercial language
- Get defensive when performance dips
- Overpromise because they want to prove themselves
- Escalate tension instead of absorbing it
- Optimise for their metric instead of the business outcome

And big organisations punish that quickly. Retail businesses are fragile systems. Margins fluctuate. Stock risk matters. Return rates distort data. Trading teams have seasonal pressure. Finance protects cash. Agencies protect KPIs. Leadership protects optics.

What We Focus On vs What the Business Cares About

PPC Metrics	Business Metrics
CTR	Margin
CPC	Cash Flow
ROAS	Stock Risk
Conversion Rate	Cost to Serve

Different Metrics. Different Consequences.

If you don't understand that ecosystem, you can create chaos without realising it. The practitioners who will thrive in 2026 won't just understand PMAX or bidding mechanics.

They will:

- Translate performance into contribution and risk
- Slow down scale when foundations aren't ready
- Challenge stakeholders without becoming adversarial
- Document decision logic before pressure hits
- Stay calm when others are reacting emotionally

Because in high-pressure trading environments, performance marketing becomes an influence role. You're not just optimising campaigns. You're stabilising the system. Technical skill gets you in the door, but emotional regulation and commercial literacy keep you there. In 2026, the edge won't be who scales fastest, it will be who can scale without destabilising the organisation. The most valuable paid media operators won't just drive growth, they'll be the ones who create clarity inside complexity.

Practical Advice for PPCers TODAY

1. Stop Talking Like Google Ads. Start Talking Like Finance - If you can't explain your strategy in margin, risk and cash flow terms, you won't win long-term influence
2. Don't Optimise in Isolation - Understand trading calendars, stock risk and operational pressure before you scale ad spend
3. Write Down Your Strategic Logic - When performance dips, memory gets selective. Protect yourself with documented rationale
4. Absorb Pressure. Don't Amplify It - Reacting emotionally under scrutiny erodes trust fast
5. Influence First. Optimise Second - In complex organisations, alignment drives performance more than tactics

Operator	vs	Technician
Understands Margin		Knows the Platform
Documents Strategy		Optimises Tactics
Absorbs Pressure		Talks Features
Aligns Teams		Reacts Quickly

In 2026, Influence Beats Implementation



Matt Beswick

Paid Marketing Manager, Quality Bearings Online

Matt leads digital strategy at Quality Bearings Online, where he applies over 20 years of performance marketing expertise to the global distribution of precision components. He specializes in scaling B2B brands through Microsoft Advertising and feed optimization, focusing on how AI-driven search and Copilot integration are reshaping the industrial procurement journey.

"The foundations are still what matters most... If your shopping feeds are content-rich and accurate, AI agents will find and recommend your products much easier than those who haven't done that foundational work."

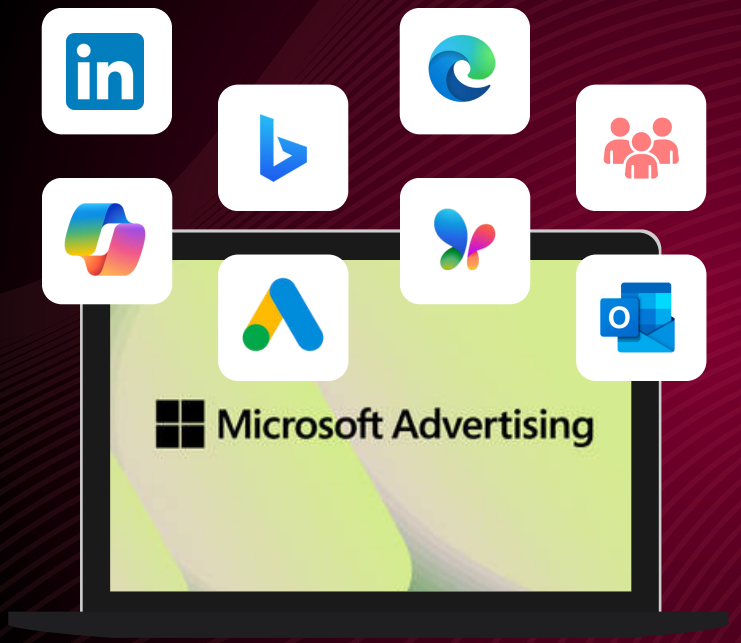
The AI-Driven Shift in B2B Advertising

In 2026, I expect to see B2B advertisers really start to leverage Microsoft Ads with more purpose. Over the last year or so, we've seen some really big improvements on the Microsoft platform including better performance in Performance Max, the introduction of audience ads, impression based remarketing and obviously LinkedIn audiences being made available.

All of the above, make Microsoft a more attractive prospect for anyone in the B2B space. I also expect people to start treating Microsoft's version of Performance Max as a really useful tool in their strategy for customer acquisition. Given copilot is now embedded in almost every Microsoft platform, and with Performance Max being the easiest way to get your products or services featured inside those AI results, I really expect people will start to take this more seriously over the next 12 months!

In terms of practical advice, I always say the same thing, but it seems more important than ever right now. Do the basics well. We are entering a whole new world of PPC with the introduction of AI but the foundations are still what matters most.

In terms of shopping, it's more important than ever to get your input data right. If your shopping feeds are full of content-rich titles and descriptions, with accurate and helpful attributes, I expect AI agents will be able to find and recommend your products much easier than anyone that hasn't undertaken that really important, foundational work.





Lunio

James Deeney

Content lead, Lunio

James is the Senior Content Manager at Lunio and a daily(ish) meditator who enjoys olympic weightlifting even though he's not very good at it. He specialises in SEO, copy that converts, and podcast production.

"The 'keywordless' future of PPC has already arrived... [but] enabling AI Max increases exposure to invalid traffic by an average of 35%."

The Keywordless Future:
Balancing Automation with Traffic Integrity

As AI and automation become more deeply embedded in ad platforms, the skill set required of PPC professionals is shifting rapidly. Incremental bid and keyword optimisations are becoming less important as platforms automate more of the tactical work. In 2026, the biggest performance gains will come from a broader, more holistic approach: compelling offer design, conversion-focused landing page optimisation, and a stronger grasp of consumer psychology. PPCers will increasingly need to understand product positioning and messaging just as well as they understand campaign structure.

With the rollout of AI Max for search campaigns, the "keywordless" future of PPC has already arrived. And Google will push adoption even harder in 2026. While many advertisers are reporting solid early results, the feature casts a very wide net, often expanding into competitor terms, branded search, and loosely related search categories. Robust exclusions must be built proactively to minimise waste. Lunio's dataset shows that enabling AI Max increases exposure to invalid traffic **by an average of 35%,** largely due to this broader, more indiscriminate expansion across Google's inventory.

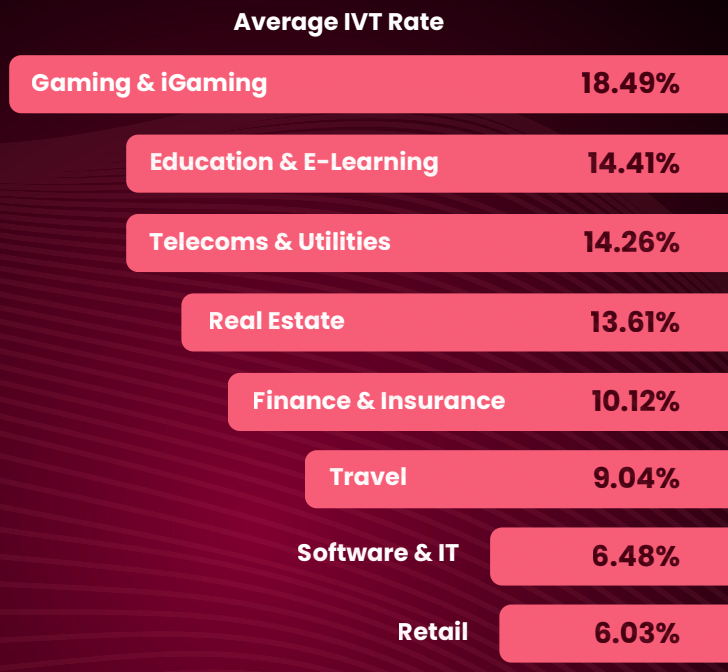
We're also seeing a significant rise in investment in Google Demand Gen campaigns across the Lunio customer base, a trend we expect to accelerate as advertisers look for efficient ways to drive upper and mid-funnel impact, while platform automation (e.g. lookalike audience targeting) continues to improve.

Generative AI will also play a much bigger role in creative production next year, especially for any brands spending heavily on Meta, which tends to reward creative volume and velocity. But these GenAI solutions remain far from "plug-and-play." Creative output still fails frequently, lacks brand nuance, or isn't market-ready without human intervention. Strong creative direction and editorial oversight remain essential.

Finally, data from Lunio's Global Invalid Traffic Report 2026 highlights a major risk for lead-gen advertisers: on average they experience 32.07% higher invalid traffic rates than transactional businesses. Multi-step lead flows create more surface area for automated systems to imitate legitimate user behaviour, making form protection and submission validation a non-negotiable part of a truly efficient lead-gen strategy in the agentic AI era.

35%

average increase in invalid traffic by turning on AI max





Ayisha Yousef

PPC & Performance Marketing Specialist, What Matters Media

Ayisha Yousef is a senior PPC and performance marketing specialist with 10+ years of experience across the UK and global markets. She has worked with brands including Selfridges, TK Maxx and Reebok, and is the founder of What Matters Media, an independent agency focused on profit-led growth, strong creative and clear strategy.

"The biggest performance gap in PPC today isn't execution - it's decision-making. The goal isn't to be 'hyper-optimised,' it's to stop optimising for activity and start optimising for impact."

PPC is no longer about optimisation, it's about decision-making

Most PPC accounts today aren't underperforming because of platforms, AI automation, or even competition. They're underperforming because teams are optimising the wrong things.

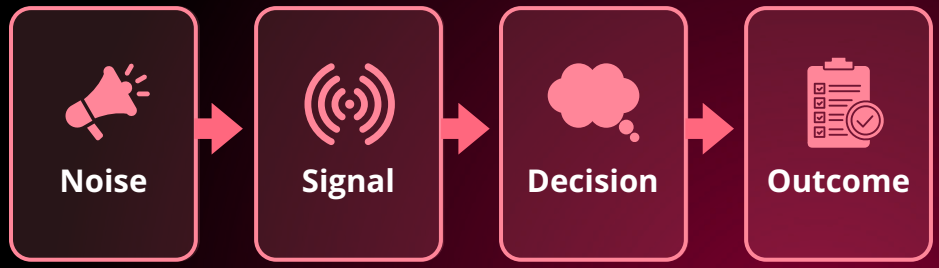
I audit a lot of accounts where teams say they are "testing" or "iterating", but what's really happening is endless tweaking. Small bid changes, minor creative edits, constant restructuring. There's a lot of movement, but very little progress. The account looks busy, yet the commercial outcome barely changes.

AI and automation haven't killed PPC skills, but they have changed what skills matter. With smart bidding, broad match, PMax and now AI Max handling execution reasonably well, the biggest performance gap I see comes down to decision-making. What teams choose to change, what they leave alone, and when.

Strong PPC performance now comes from clarity. Clarity on what the account is actually trying to achieve, which signals matter, and which ones do not. Weak accounts react to every metric shift. Strong accounts understand variance, wait for meaningful signals, and act with intent.

The best-performing teams I work with do fewer, more impactful things. They know when to push spend, when to hold, when to kill ideas, and when to let learning play out. They also understand that not every test is worth running, and not every dip in ROAS needs intervention.

Looking ahead, PPC roles will continue to move away from platform mechanics and towards judgement. The marketers who win will be the ones who can make confident decisions with imperfect data, align paid media to real commercial goals, and avoid optimising for activity instead of impact.



Practical Advice

- Stop calling micro-tweaks "testing". Test ideas that can actually change outcomes
- Decide upfront what data you need before making changes
- Let automation execute, but don't let it decide your strategy
- Focus on decision quality, not volume of optimisations
- Measure success against profit and incrementally, not just in-platform ROAS



Scott Carruthers

Senior Paid Search Director, Journey Further

Scott is Senior Paid Search Director at Journey Further, where he leads a team of 30 PPC specialists across Leeds, Manchester, London, and New York. With over eight years at the agency, he has built a reputation for connecting technical precision with creative problem solving; bridging the gap between platform mechanics and real business outcomes. He speaks regularly at industry events and is one of the more vocal advocates for human judgement in an increasingly automated discipline.

"In 2026, the gap between practitioners won't be who knows best practice. AI knows best practice. The gap will be who can think beyond it."

Best Practice Is the Floor, Not the Ceiling

Here's an uncomfortable truth: if your competitive advantage in paid media is that you know best practice, you no longer have a competitive advantage.
This isn't a warning about some distant, automated future. It's a description of 2026. The adoption of AI tools, both inside the platforms and outside them, has reached the point where best practice is no longer a differentiator. It's a given. Google's own tools will set up a campaign, generate the copy, pick the audiences, adjust the bids, and optimise toward your goals. Not perfectly, but competently. And competently is enough to level the playing field in a way we've never quite seen before.

Which means the question you should be asking yourself right now isn't “am I following best practice?" It's "what am I doing that the machine can't?"
The answer has to be creativity. Not creativity in the narrow sense of making beautiful ads (although that matters too). Creativity in the way you think about problems. In the way you frame a brief. In the connections you make between data that doesn't obviously belong together. In the way you structure a question before anyone else has thought to ask it.

Best practice, by definition, is what everyone is doing. The platforms are built around it. The recommendations tabs push you toward it. The reps will call you about it on a Tuesday afternoon. And in 2026, AI will implement it for you before you've even opened the account.

If everyone is doing the same thing with the same tools, the performance ceiling is the same for everyone. The only way to break through it is to do something that isn't in the playbook.

That might look like a completely unconventional account structure built around a specific business constraint. It might be a bidding signal that nobody else thought to pass back. It might be a creative angle that comes from actually talking to the sales team, or reading the reviews, or understanding what a customer's week looks like before they ever type anything into Google.
The irony is that the more automation takes over the tactical layer of PPC, the more valuable the strategic and creative layer becomes. And that layer is still entirely human.

Practical Advice

- The next time you're auditing an account, don't just ask "what's wrong?" Ask "what would have to be true for this to be the best possible version of this account?"
- Stop treating Search Query Reports as a list of things to negative out. Treat them as a window into how your customers actually think and what problems they're actually trying to solve. That intelligence should be shaping your copy, your landing pages, and your broader strategy.
- Get out of the platform more. Talk to clients, talk to sales teams, read what your audience reads. The best PPC thinking rarely starts inside Google Ads. It starts with understanding a business problem well enough that the solution becomes obvious, and then using the platform to execute it.
- AI can do best practice. The edge in 2026 belongs to the people who can do something that isn't in the manual yet.

Reframe your audits



Rethink SQRs



Get Out Of The Platform



CONNECTIVE3

Nick Handley

Performance Director, Connective3

Nick has 10+ years of experience in the digital marketing space with expertise across Strategy and Paid Media with stints at both agency and in-house. Currently heading up measurement and strategy at Connective3, Nick has previously worked at Rise at Seven, m/SIX and Impression, working with a variety of Brands including TalkTalk, Mark Hill & National Trust on all things digital. Nick Is passionate about tying together Brand and Performance for his client through measurement and media planning.

"The advertisers that come out on top in 2026 won't just be touting 'AI'; they'll be the ones whose feeds and creatives are geared around the new, conversational ways people search."

The Conversational Shift:
Why Data Hygiene is the Real AI Strategy in 2026

We're seeing a huge shift in search behaviour and our "traditional" channels are going to have to work much harder if they want to stay top of mind to capture advertisers' pounds, especially with the rise of Ads across LLMs and AI in 2026. Queries are becoming more conversational off the back of the consumer market adoption of LLMs in 2025 with the likes of ChatGPT, Gemini and others becoming somewhat monolithic in our search landscape. In a recent study Adobe study, 77% of US ChatGPT users say they use it as a search engine and over a third have discovered a new product or brand through it (Adobe, 2025) and a huge 70% of users surveyed have said LLMs are fast becoming their preferred platform for recommendations (Master of Code, 2025).

But here's the thing, the interesting bit for me isn't "AI" as a buzzword, it's how it changes the way people search much like we've seen with the rise of social and community-based search years ago.

Years ago I would have searched for "best cross trail running shoes", but now I'm being more long tail, conversational you'd say, searching for "best running shoes for cross-country races in the UK". Long tail searches are having a revival with the rise of conversational search. A recent Brant study found longer 7 to 8 word queries have grown by roughly 10% of search (Brant, 2025) and I reckon this will only continue.

Conversational search behaviours are growing in Google (and other traditional platforms) and you can see that reflected in the aggressive touting Google pushes towards broad match, YT and Demand Gen of course, PMAX and the early "AI Max" guinea pig testing.

With the massive changes we're seeing in auctions, the rapid shift of the industry, 2026 will continue to see a larger importance on what sits behind your ad accounts, something that has always been important. Going into 2026, I think feed optimisation and creative optimisation are going to be the two most important ways to win alongside opening back up long tail for Search. Optimising titles, attributes and imagery will stop being just a hygiene task and start becoming more core of strategy especially as LLMs roll out more native ad formats.

If your data is messy or damn right bad, you most likely won't be entered in wider auctions, much akin to traditional shopping placements. The advertisers that come top in 2026 won't just be touting "AI", they'll most likely be the ones whose feeds and creatives are geared around the new emerging ways people search, allowing algos to understand and for results to be serviced in conversational means of search.



Opteo

Guillaume Devinat

CEO, Opteo

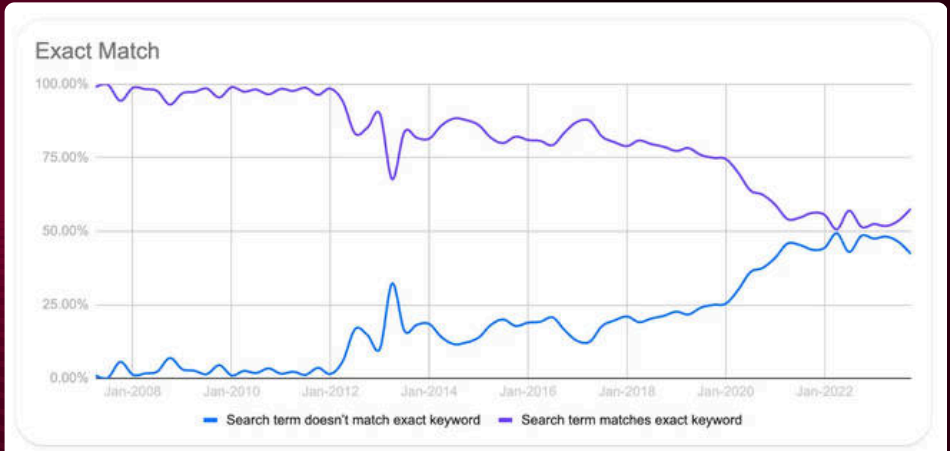
Guillaume Devinat is the co-founder and CEO of Opteo. After years scaling Google Ads for clients of all sizes, he founded Opteo to help performance marketing teams make the most of every ad dollar. Today, he focuses on helping advertisers reduce wasted spend, retain control, and maximise performance in an increasingly automated paid media landscape.

"Automation is here to stay, but so is its 'wasted spend' side effect; the goal isn't to fight the machines, it's to stop writing them blank cheques by using mandatory guardrails."

Wasted Ad Spend in the Automation & AI Era
And What To Do About It

Across all major paid media platforms, the direction of travel is clear: more automation, less control, less visibility. Google Performance Max, AI Max, Meta Advantage+, LinkedIn Accelerate... automation everywhere.

On Google specifically, exact match has gone from matching the keyword 95%+ of the time to ~50%, automated bidding now represents 80%+ of bid strategies, and search-term visibility continues to shrink.

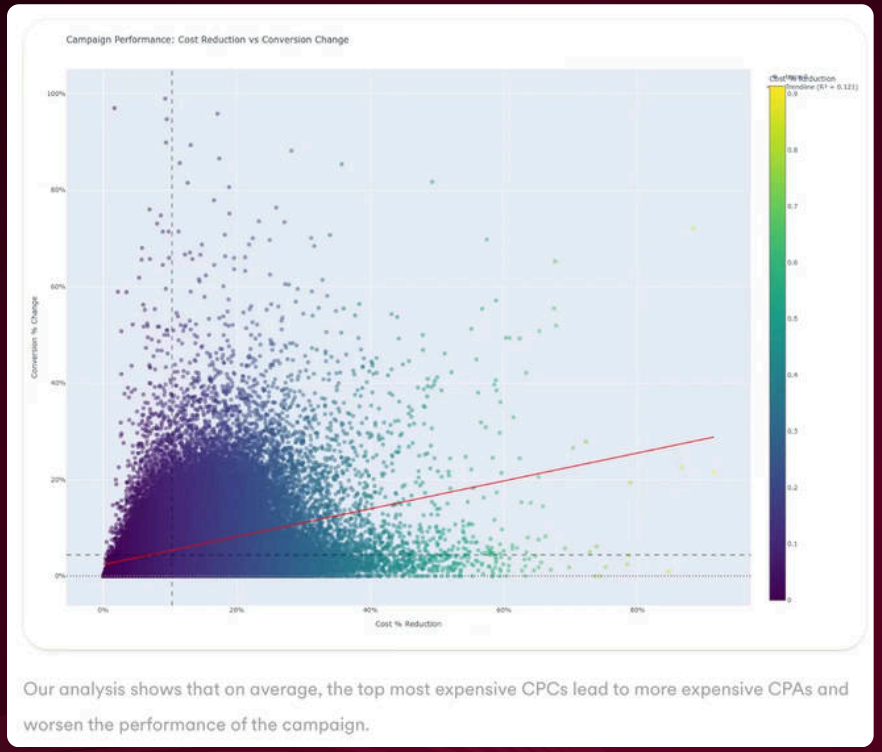


460m impressions of exact match keywords (including close variant matches) across 18k+ accounts

This trend has been hugely lucrative for the platforms (Alphabet shareholders are smiling), has meaningfully lowered the barrier to entry, and has likely improved performance for the average advertiser by levelling the playing field. But it has also introduced and amplified significant wasted spend. Below are 3 examples.

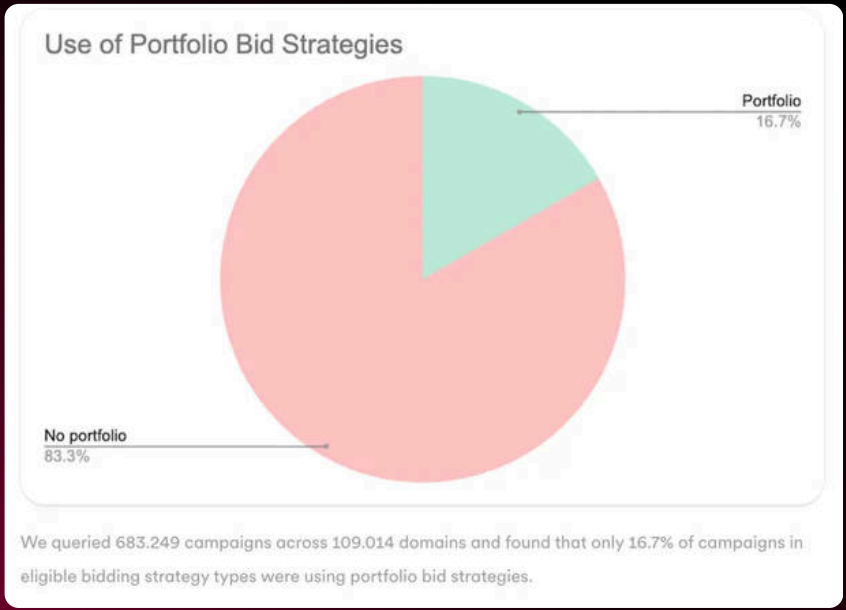
1. Overly Expensive Clicks

Automated bidding is often left completely uncapped. Google can bid as high as it wants if it believes a user will convert. Sometimes this gets absurdly high. At Opteo, we routinely see individual clicks costing hundreds of dollars, occasionally far more than the target CPA itself!



Our analysis shows that on average, the top most expensive CPCs lead to more expensive CPAs and worsen the performance of the campaign.

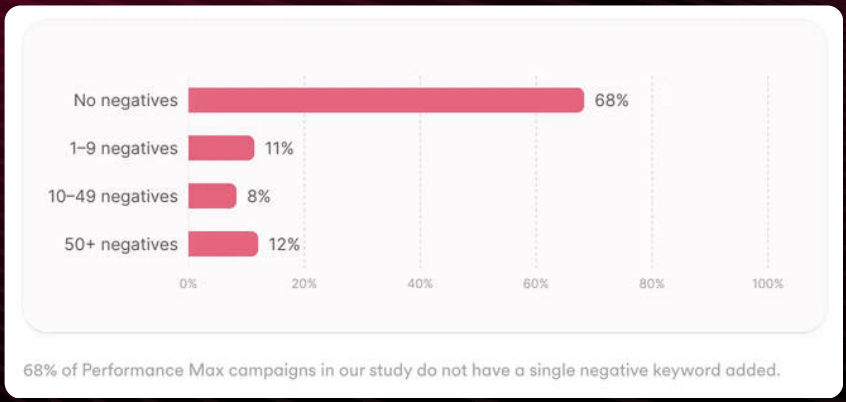
Our research shows that the most expensive 10% of clicks produce CPAs that are 134% higher on average. Often, the budget spent on the most expensive clicks is clearly better reallocated elsewhere. There's a powerful fix: portfolio bid strategies with max CPC caps. Yet surprisingly, <10% of campaigns use them.



We queried 683.249 campaigns across 109.014 domains and found that only 16.7% of campaigns in eligible bidding strategy types were using portfolio bid strategies.

2. Irrelevant Search Terms

Last year, we found that 68% of PMax campaigns have zero negative keywords applied. Even the most enthusiastic AI advocates would struggle to defend zero negatives! Negative keyword usage has improved since campaign-level negatives came to Performance Max, but they remain drastically underused. There's significant opportunity to reclaim budget spent on irrelevant traffic. N-gram analysis and AI classification both continue to prove highly effective here.



68% of Performance Max campaigns in our study do not have a single negative keyword added.

3. Unsavoury Placements

At Opteo, we've begun analysing placements across PMax, GDN, and search-partner data. As with search terms, the sheer volume makes meaningful review difficult - made worse by the fact that, in both Performance Max and search partners, performance metrics are limited to impression data.

To make sense of this, placements need to be classified and filtered at scale, particularly where they pose brand risk: adult content, violence and tragedy, hate and profanity, extreme political content, low-quality made-for-ads sites, and made-for-kids content.

The result is a vast long tail of placements that no advertiser would actively choose - yet automation allocates spend there by default.

Automation, absolutely. But guardrails are mandatory.

These are just three examples of how automation can quietly create wasted spend, but there are countless more: default platform settings (search partners, locations of interest, display inventory in search, optimised targeting, auto-generated assets, URL expansion, Advantage+ enhancements, audience expansion), underused exclusions (locations, audiences, demographics, brands, devices, networks), and poor alignment between search terms, ads, and landing pages.

In conclusion, automation is here to stay, and so is its wasted spend side effect. I hope we'll continue to see advertisers pair automation with clear guardrails, reclaiming wasted spend and reinvesting it profitably, instead of writing blank cheques to the platforms.

Key Takeaways

PPC is now Decision-Making, not Execution:
Execution (bidding, matching) is handled by the machines. The performance gap now lies in Decision Quality—knowing when to push, when to hold, and which data signals to ignore.

The Keywordless Future is Here:
We must move away from a one-keyword-to-one-ad mentality. Success now comes from Intent-Based Themes supported by broad match and deep audience signals.

Post-Click Ownership:
As platform controls vanish, PPC specialists must expand their remit to the Full User Journey, optimising landing pages and CRM feedback loops to stay relevant.

Mandatory Guardrails:
Automation is a blank cheque if left uncapped. Portfolio bid strategies and placement exclusions are the only way to prevent the AI from buying £100 clicks.

What teams should start, stop, or rethink going into 2026

START	STOP	RETHINK
Feeding Profit Data (POAS): Integrate profit into your feed so AI hunts for margin, not just revenue.	**Micro-Tweaking:** Stop calling minor bid changes testing. It resets machine learning for zero gain.	**The Role of the Website:** Is your site a destination, or just a data source for AI agents?
Creative Systems: Use AI to version 50+ human-led concepts to combat rapid ad fatigue.	**Uncapped Bidding:** Always use Portfolio Bid Strategies with a Max CPC cap to prevent spend leakage.	**Attribution:** Move away from Last Click toward Incrementality Testing and MMM.
Labour Illusion UX: Build intentional friction (like quizzes) to prove value in an instant world.	**Generic AI Copy:** Users are blind to stock AI content. Prioritise brand soul and unique hooks.	**Broad Match:** It is no longer a waste tool; with the right negatives, it is the only way to capture conversational search.

The Can-Do Perspective:
Strategy in the Age of Automation

A short reflective ending, focusing on:
Change is constant
The importance of strategic thinking over tools
The value of experimentation
How teams can stay resilient and adaptable

As we pace through 2026, one truth remains: in paid media, change is the only constant. We have shifted from ten blue links to conversational oracles, and from manual bidding to black box automation.

The rise of the machine does not signal the end of the marketer - it signals the return of the strategist.

Strategy Over Tools
The contributors in this report agree: the biggest performance gap in 2026 isn't a lack of tools, but a lack of intentionality. Success no longer comes from "hacking" an algorithm; it comes from the human ability to align media to real commercial outcomes. We must stop optimising for activity and start optimizing for impact.

The Resilience of Experimentation
To stay adaptable, teams must move beyond sa" playbooks. In an era where conversational search changes daily, resilience is built through:

Testing big ideas, not micro-tweaks.

Embracing friction (like curated quizzes) to prove value to the user.

Feeding AI profit data, not just revenue, to protect your bottom line.

The future of paid media belongs to those brave enough to make confident decisions with imperfect data. Automation is a powerful engine, but a human must remain at the wheel. Let's stop writing blank cheques to the platforms and start leading with intent.

4 Critical Tests for your 2026 Strategy

The Labor Illusion Test
Action: Replace instant landing pages with a multi-step quiz or a calculating your results progress bar.
Why: In the AI era, instant feels cheap. Forcing 3 seconds of friction to show the AI is working for the user can significantly increase conversion rates and lead quality.

The Blank Cheque Audit
Action: Move 100% of uncapped automated campaigns into Portfolio Bid Strategies with a hard Max CPC limit.
Why: Our data shows the top 10% of most expensive clicks often produce a 134% higher CPA. Caps prevent the AI from buying conversions at any cost.

The POAS vs. ROAS Pivot
Action: Integrate your COGS (Cost of Goods Sold) and return data into your Google/Meta feed.
Why: If you feed the AI revenue, it finds high-volume, low-margin sales. If you feed it Profit, it hunts for your highest-margin customers.

The Keywordless Search Test
Action: Launch a Conversational campaign using Broad Match and aggressive Negative Keyword lists based on N-gram analysis.
Why: Users no longer type shorthand keywords; they ask 15-word questions. If you only use Exact Match, you are invisible to the most qualified, high-intent conversational queries.

Conclusion

The Driver Over the Drivetrain

The takeaway for 2026 is simple: Automation is the engine, but judgment is the driver. As platforms become "black boxes," the human premium shifts from technical execution to strategic orchestration. Change is constant, resilience comes from mastering the signals you feed the machine, not the levers you pull inside it.

Adapting to the 2026 landscape doesn't require a one-size-fits-all overhaul; it requires a modular approach to expertise. Whether you choose to partner with a full-service agency for end-to-end orchestration or engage a micro-agency to plug specific gaps like creative velocity or profit-first measurement, the goal is the same: to move your team from "operators" to "orchestrators." Many brands are now finding success with a hybrid model - using specialist consultants to upskill their in-house teams on mandatory guardrails and AI-assisted workflows, eventually transitioning to a lean internal department that handles the brand "soul" while outsourcing the high-technical technical maintenance. This flexibility allows you to scale your strategic depth without the fixed cost of a massive department, ensuring you remain agile enough to pivot as the platforms continue to evolve.



can-do
digital marketing

Ready To Move Beyond The Basics?
Let’s continue the conversion.

The shift toward an AI-driven B2B landscape is inevitable, and we’re here to help you navigate it - whether that means empowering your internal team or taking full control of your strategy. We offer a range of low-friction ways to stress-test your accounts and prepare for the keywordless future.

We can take your accounts to the next level commercially, through a Paid Media Strategy Refresh or a comprehensive AI and Automation Review. We’ll align your Google and Microsoft Ads with the latest LinkedIn audience capabilities to ensure you aren't just using AI, but winning with it.

For all readers, we’re offering a Complimentary Audit to identify wasted spend and missed opportunities in your current setup. You can also stay ahead of the curve by following Chris Nightingale on Linkedin to get the latest on everything PPC.

And if you’re still thirsty for more, listen to Chris Nightingale and Nick Handley talk everything Performance Marketing & AI on the Prompted Podcast, available on Spotify or YouTube.

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