2026 Outlook Study: September Update

A SNAPSHOT OF U.S. AD SPEND, OPPORTUNITIES, AND STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH

September 2026

iab.

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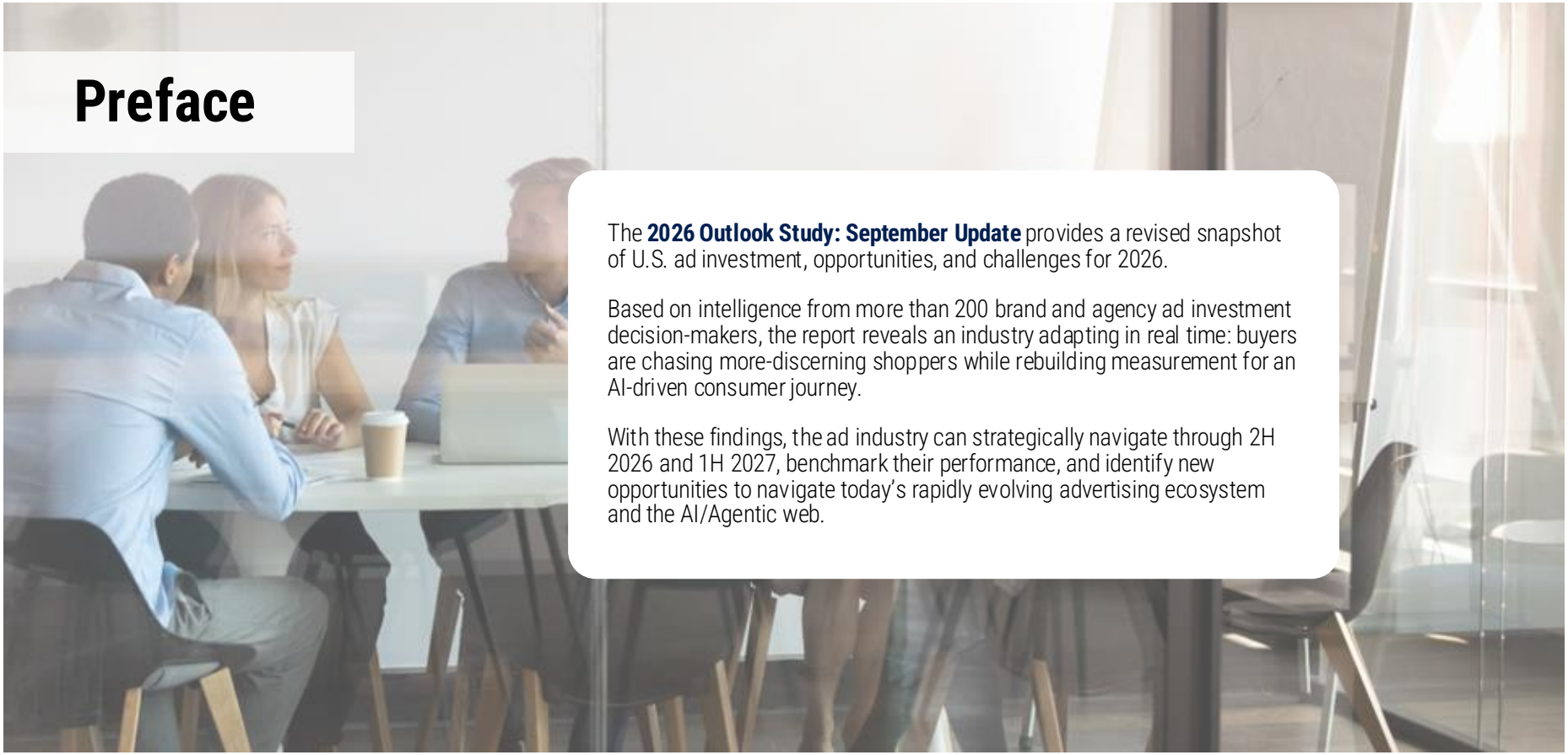
Preface

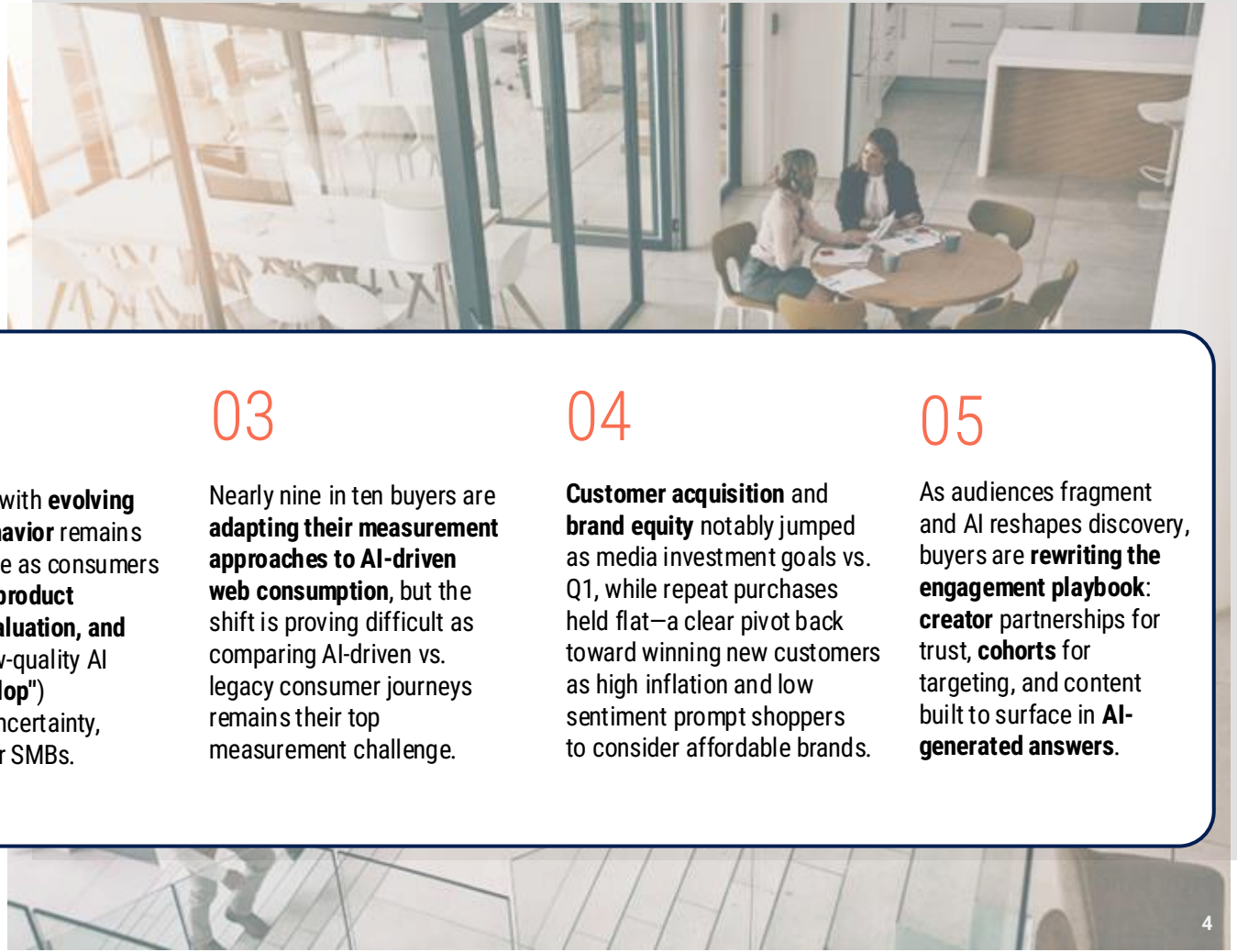


The **2026 Outlook Study: September Update** provides a revised snapshot of U.S. ad investment, opportunities, and challenges for 2026.

Based on intelligence from more than 200 brand and agency ad investment decision-makers, the report reveals an industry adapting in real time: buyers are chasing more-discerning shoppers while rebuilding measurement for an AI-driven consumer journey.

With these findings, the ad industry can strategically navigate through 2H 2026 and 1H 2027, benchmark their performance, and identify new opportunities to navigate today's rapidly evolving advertising ecosystem and the AI/Agentic web.

Key Insights



01

The updated U.S. ad spend forecast climbed to **+12.3% for FY 2026**—up 2.8 points from January, as **major cyclical events** drove a strong 1H and **macro-economic concerns eased** amid cautious buyer optimism.

02

Keeping pace with **evolving consumer behavior** remains a top challenge as consumers turn to **AI for product discovery, evaluation, and purchase**. Low-quality AI content (**"AI slop"**) compounds uncertainty, particularly for SMBs.

03

Nearly nine in ten buyers are **adapting their measurement approaches to AI-driven web consumption**, but the shift is proving difficult as comparing AI-driven vs. legacy consumer journeys remains their top measurement challenge.

04

Customer acquisition and **brand equity** notably jumped as media investment goals vs. Q1, while repeat purchases held flat—a clear pivot back toward winning new customers as high inflation and low sentiment prompt shoppers to consider affordable brands.

05

As audiences fragment and AI reshapes discovery, buyers are **rewriting the engagement playbook**: **creator** partnerships for trust, **cohorts** for targeting, and content built to surface in **AI-generated answers**.

U.S. Ad Spend: Direction, Channels, & Goals

2026 ad spend projections rise as major events deliver and economic concerns ease

The Winter Olympics and World Cup both set audience and ad revenue records* which helped drive stronger-than-expected 1H ad spend while ad buyer sentiment appears bullish regarding the upcoming midterm elections—rounding out a busy, event-driven year.

Additionally, buyers report less concern than in January regarding macro-economic headwinds affecting ad investment (see page 12).

As a result, **we've raised our full-year growth forecast by 2.8 points, to +12.3% as buyers continue to spend while being cautiously optimistic.**

% CHANGE U.S. AD SPEND 2026 vs. 2025

+9.5%	+12.3%
January 2026	September 2026

*Reuters, August 2026; Axios, February 2026

Sep '26: n=211; Jan '26: n=205;

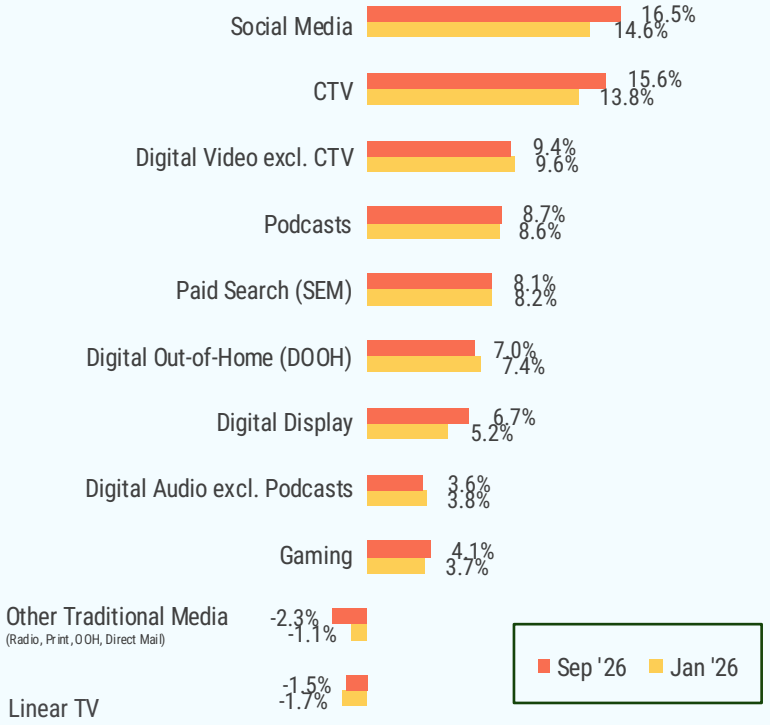
Q: Please provide your estimated percent change (+/- %) in projected total media spend for FULL YEAR 2026 (Jan to Dec) compared to FULL YEAR 2025 actuals.

Social and CTV widen their lead as the top engines of ad spend growth

Social and **CTV** began the year as the fastest-growing channels, and expectations for both have risen again—while most others held steady or grew modestly.

The strong showing from this year's tentpole events pushed even more viewership toward streaming and social, adding to momentum both channels already had from creator content, commerce, and a strengthening track record on delivering business outcomes.

PROJECTED % CHANGE U.S. AD SPEND 2026 vs. 2025 BY CHANNEL



n=floating base

Q: Please provide your estimated percent change (+/- %) in projected total media spend for FULL YEAR 2026 (Jan to Dec) compared to FULL YEAR 2025 actuals BY CHANNEL

Commerce media will grow nearly 14% as AI and data partnerships expand its reach

Expectations for commerce media are up 1.5 points since January, putting it on pace to **grow 10% faster than the overall ad market.**

Behind that growth, AI is shortening the distance between discovery and purchase, making commerce inventory more valuable wherever consumers encounter it. At the same time, new partnerships are helping commerce media extend across screens—connecting retailer purchase data with streaming inventory, adding scale through ad tech, and bringing commerce directly into social feeds.

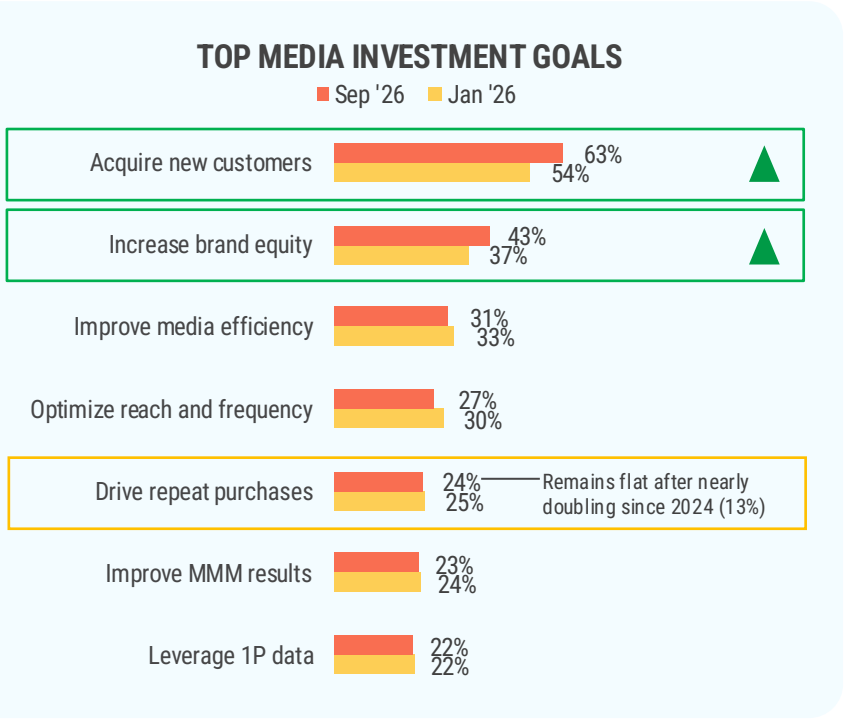
PROJECTED % CHANGE U.S. AD SPEND YoY
COMMERCE MEDIA

January 2026	September 2026
+12.1%	+13.6%

Q: Please provide your estimated percent change (+/- %) in projected total media spend for FULL YEAR 2026 (Jan to Dec) compared to FULL YEAR 2025 actuals BY CHANNEL – Commerce/Retail Media

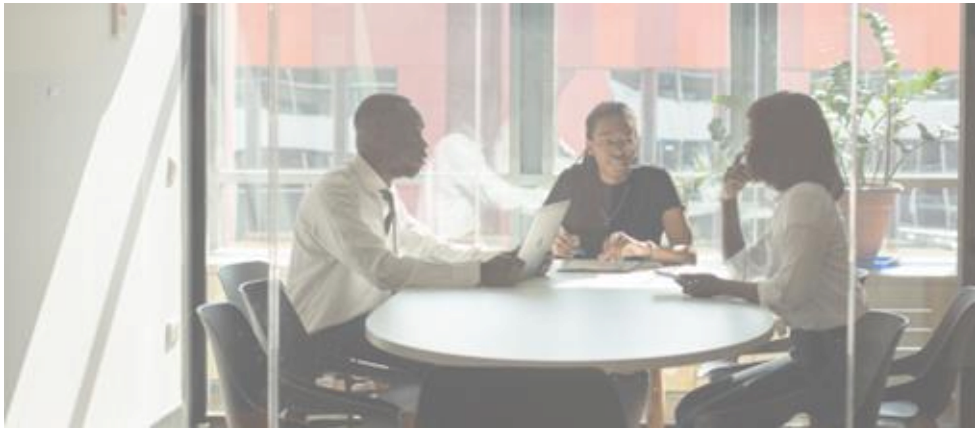
n=floating base

Customer acquisition and brand equity rebound as top buyer goals amid negative consumer sentiment



Customer acquisition rose 9 points in importance since January and brand equity gained 6 points, while repeat purchases held flat—**a clear pivot back toward winning new customers vs. retention.**

This shift comes as inflation remains elevated and consumer sentiment is at record lows*, likely making shoppers more selective about the brands and stores they choose**. Against this backdrop, buyers are doubling down on customer acquisition while renewing their focus on the brand equity that helps support it.



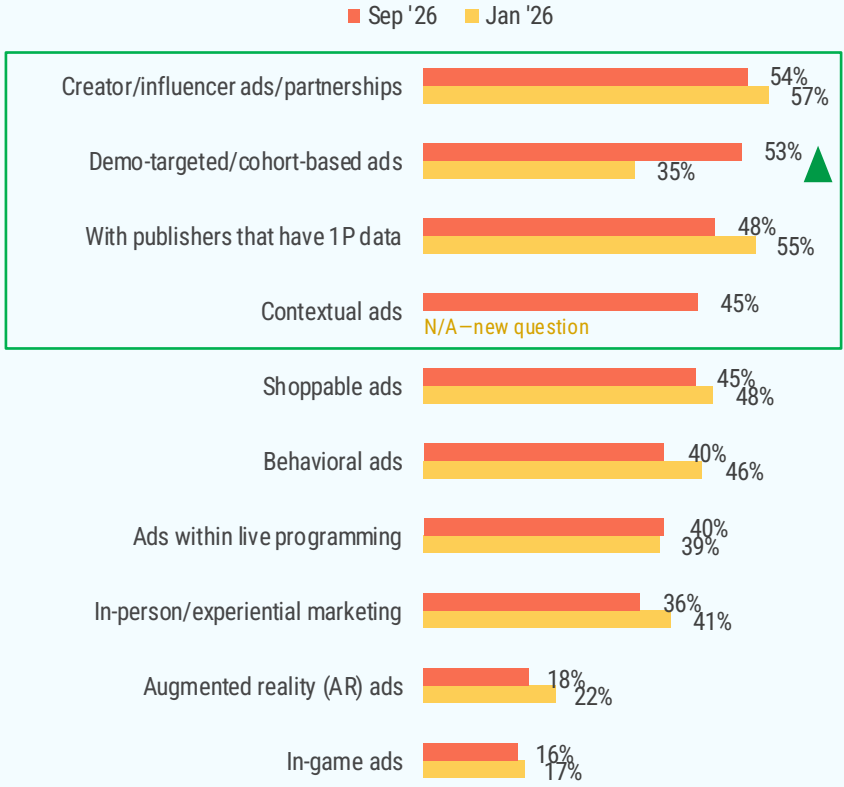
*Trading Economics, August 2026; The University of Michigan, August 2026
**Bain & Company via CNBC, July 2026; McKinsey & Company, June 2026
Sep '26: n=211; Jan '26: n=205; Responses below 20% not shown.
Q: What are your top three goals for your media investments in 2026?

Creator and cohort-based ads are buyers' top ad types as they look to reach consumers in motion

Creator investment remains strong as brands look to build trust with consumers wary of the economy. **Demo/cohort targeting** helps brands find new audiences as their base may churn and identity signals erode, while AI-enabled automation (bots, crawlers, agents) complicates audience classification.

Publisher 1P data and **contextual ads** remain key as they reinforce the growing importance buyers are placing on knowing who they are reaching and the environments in which their ads appear, as found in IAB's 2026 Digital Video Ad Spend & Strategy Report.

TOP 10 AD TYPES: INCREASED FOCUS



*Frist time asking
Sep '26: n=211; Jan '26: n=205
Q: Do you expect to FOCUS more, less, or the same amount of time and/or resources in 2026 (vs. 2025) on the following?

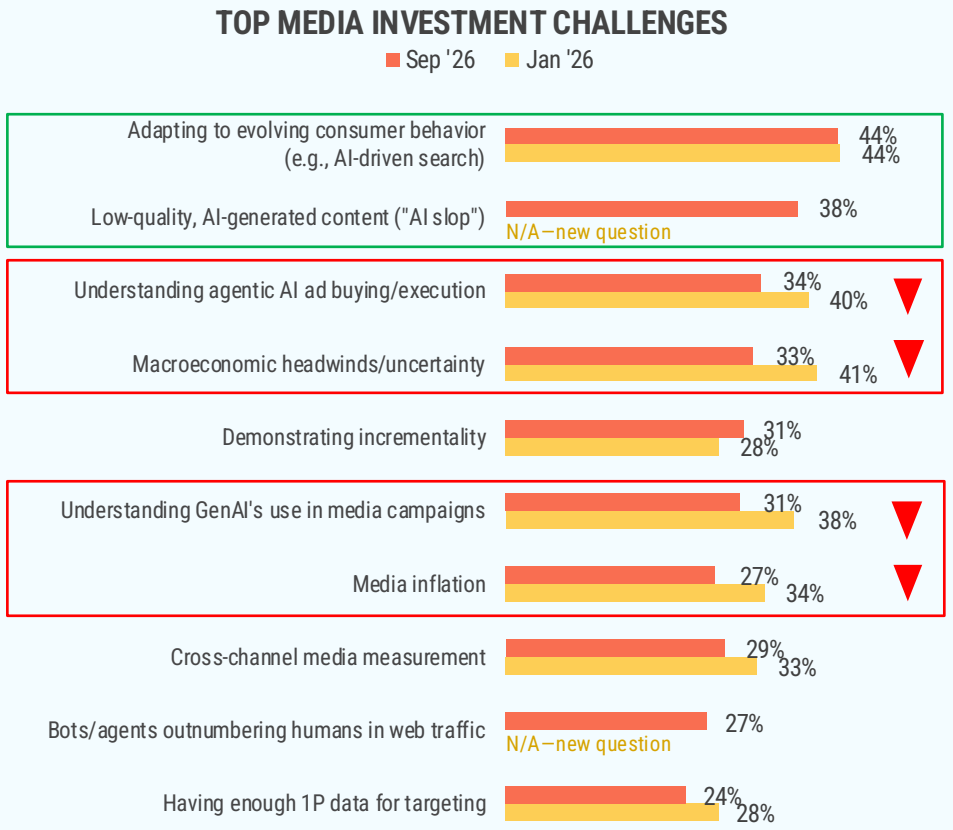
AI's Impact on Planning, Buying, & Measurement Approaches

Led by AI-driven search, "AI Slop", and agentic buying, AI overall dominates buyer investment challenges

Adapting to **AI-driven search** reinforces buyers' renewed focus on acquisition and brand-building (see page 9), as they look to capture discerning consumers within evolving purchase journeys.

Concerns about low-quality, AI content is driven by **SMBs*** (not shown) potentially reflecting them having fewer resources to address the rising issue.

Though still high, **concern around understanding agentic and GenAI has cooled** after January's peak in attention, while macro headwinds and media inflation have also softened as this year's major events delivered for buyers (see page 6).



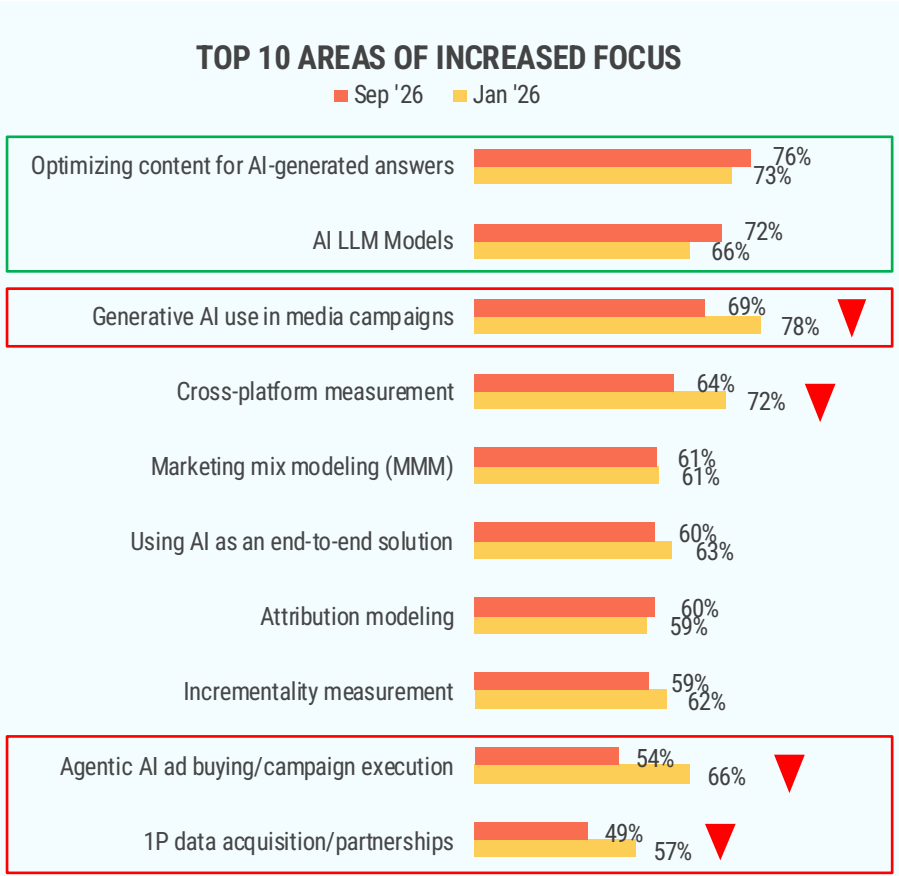
*SMBs = small-to-mid-sized advertisers spending less than $50M annually
Sep '26: n=211; Jan '26: n=205; Responses below top10 not shown.
Q: What are your greatest concerns and/or challenges regarding media investment in 2026? Select all that apply.;

Buyers top focus areas shift from using GenAI to understanding brand visibility within AI

To address the AI-driven search (see prev. page), **optimizing content for AI-generated answers** is now buyers' top focus area. The rise of this and **AI LLM models** vs. GenAI use suggests buyers are figuring out where AI fits within their processes and are now focused on strategy for navigating its broader impact.

In contrast, **most other areas eased, reflecting normalization** rather than full retreat: 1P data acquisition is declining after years of ramp-up, while agentic AI ad buying is cooling after January's peak in attention.

Cross-platform measurement's decline is largely driven by small ad spenders* (data not shown), while focus remains much higher among larger spenders.



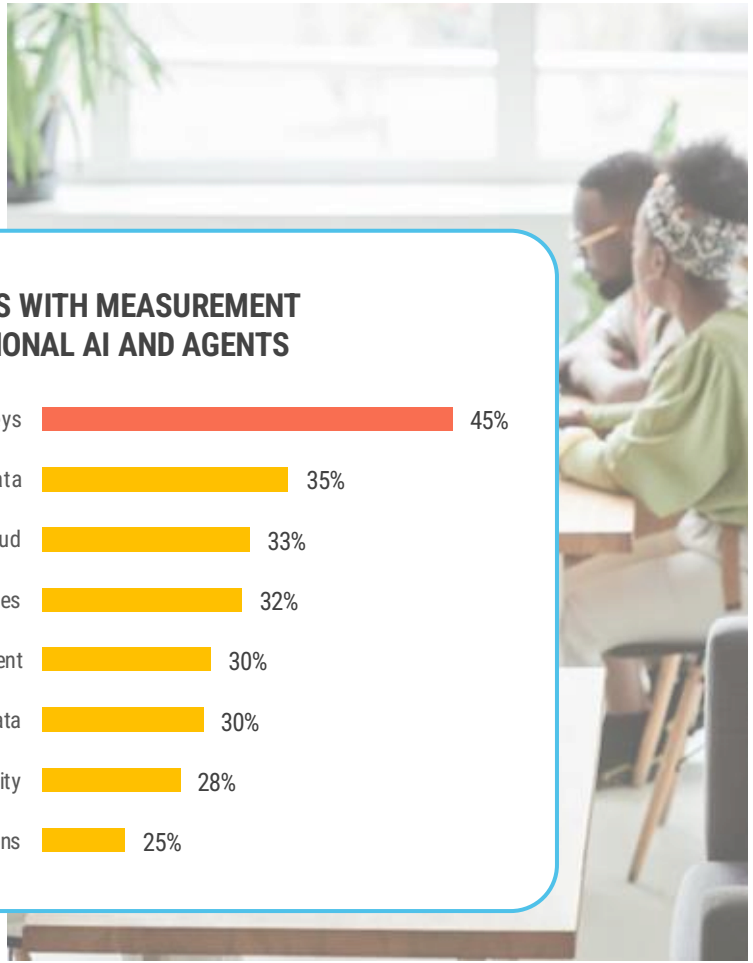
*Small ad spenders = spending less than $10M annually
Sep '26: n=211; Jan '26: n=205
Q: Do you expect to FOCUS more, less, or the same amount of time and/or resources in 2026 (vs. 2025) on the following?

Regarding measurement, comparing AI-driven vs. traditional customer journeys is the top hurdle in the expanding AI web age

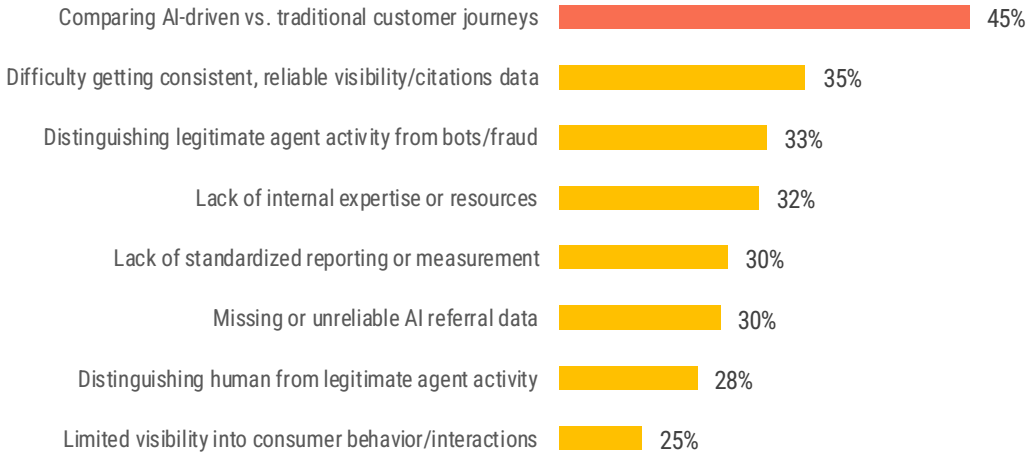
Despite buyers shifting goals and focus areas to adapt to AI-driven search, measurement of it is by far their top analysis challenge—signaling a critical lag between strategy and capability.

Without ways to compare performance across consumer journey paths, buyers risk making strategic changes based on incomplete visibility.

For small spenders**, getting consistent, reliable data on visibility/citations is equally challenging (data not shown)—potentially reflecting them having less access to tools and data for measuring AI-driven discovery.



BIGGEST CHALLENGES WITH MEASUREMENT DUE TO CONVERSATIONAL AI AND AGENTS



*Small ad spenders = spending less than $10M annually; Sep '26: n=211

Q; With conversational AI tools and AI agents both playing an increasing role in the consumer purchase journey, which of the following are the biggest challenges your team faces when measuring and analyzing media performance? Select up to 3.

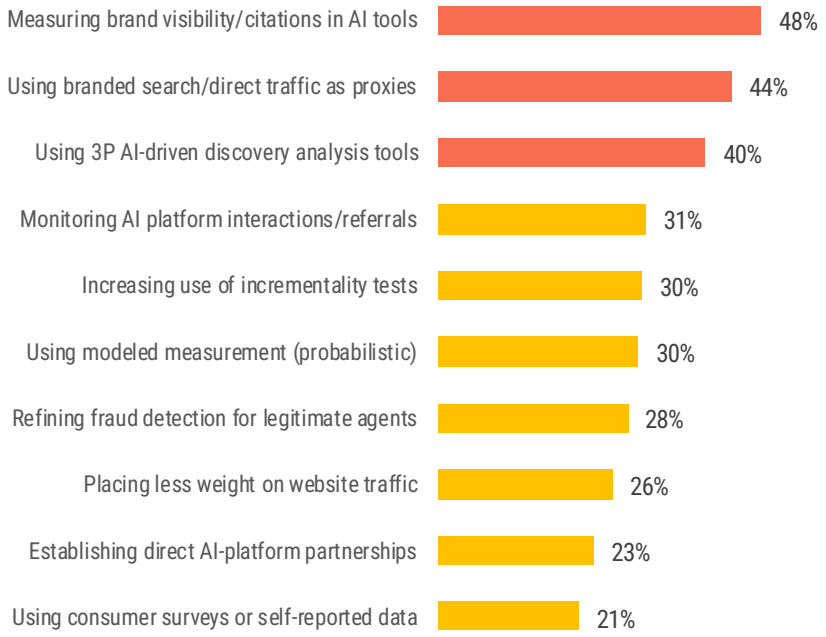
Nearly all buyers are adapting or plan to adapt performance measurement for the AI web

86% **Are making changes or expect to make changes in the next 6-12 months**

The top 3 changes buyers are making enable the most direct, accessible path to understanding their brand's presence in AI: measuring it directly, leaning on trusted proxies when the AI journey can't be tracked, and adding capabilities through 3P tools.

Overall, buyers are adding AI-specific measurement alongside their website metrics, not replacing them—only 26% are placing less weight on site traffic. Meanwhile, structural fixes like direct AI-platform partnerships (23%) remain out of reach for most..

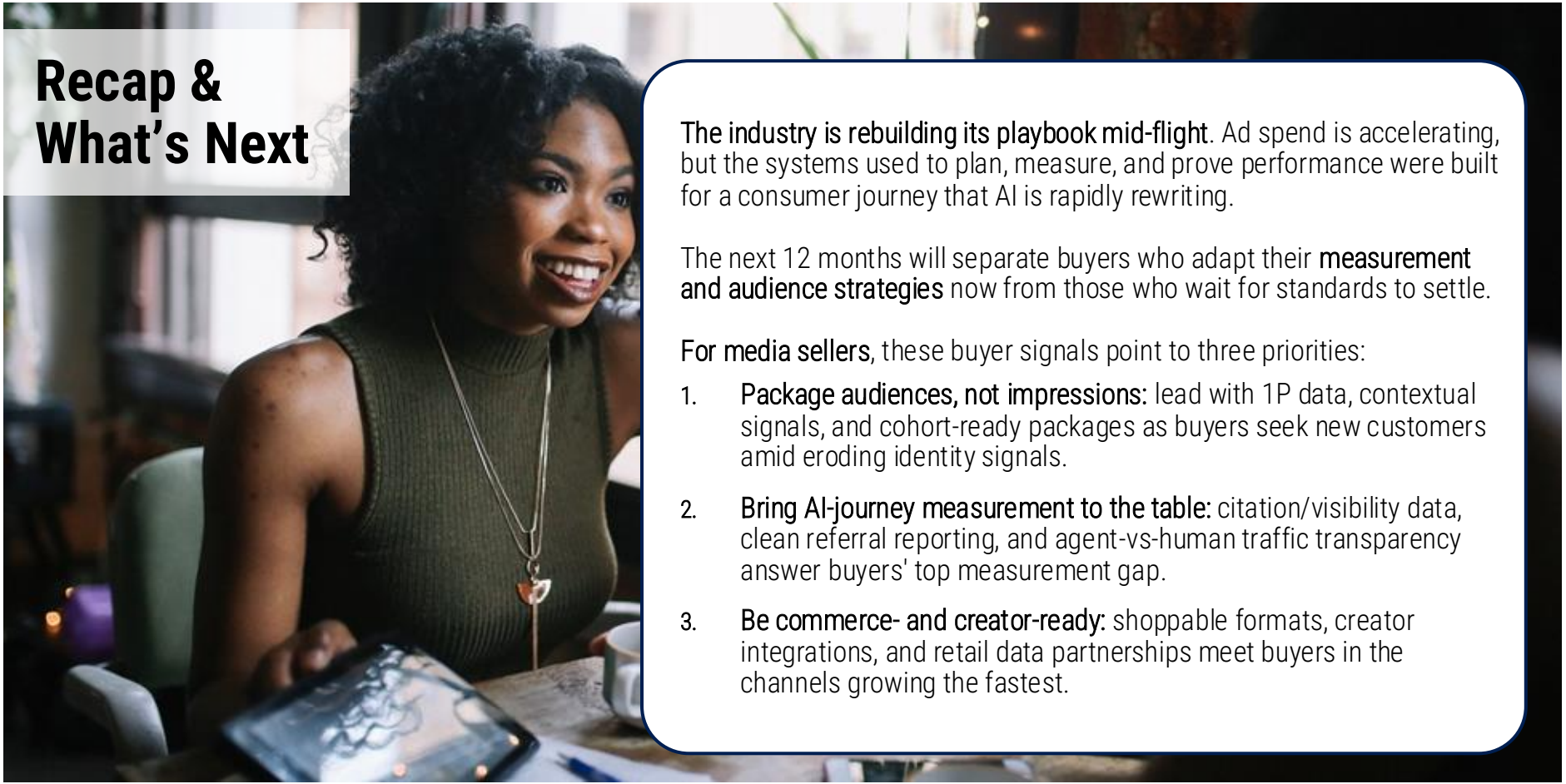
CURRENT/PLANNED CHANGES TO MEASUREMENT DUE TO CONVERSATIONAL AI AND AGENTS



*includes conversational AI tools and AI agents
Sep '26: n=211

Q With conversational AI tools and AI agents both playing an increasing role in the consumer purchase journey, which of the following changes are you now taking or expecting to take in the next 6-12 months, to measure and analyze media performance? Select all that apply..

Recap & What's Next



The industry is rebuilding its playbook mid-flight. Ad spend is accelerating, but the systems used to plan, measure, and prove performance were built for a consumer journey that AI is rapidly rewriting.

The next 12 months will separate buyers who adapt their **measurement and audience strategies** now from those who wait for standards to settle.

For media sellers, these buyer signals point to three priorities:

1. **Package audiences, not impressions:** lead with 1P data, contextual signals, and cohort-ready packages as buyers seek new customers amid eroding identity signals.
2. **Bring AI-journey measurement to the table:** citation/visibility data, clean referral reporting, and agent-vs-human traffic transparency answer buyers' top measurement gap.
3. **Be commerce- and creator-ready:** shoppable formats, creator integrations, and retail data partnerships meet buyers in the channels growing the fastest.

Appendix: Methodology & About IAB

APPENDIX

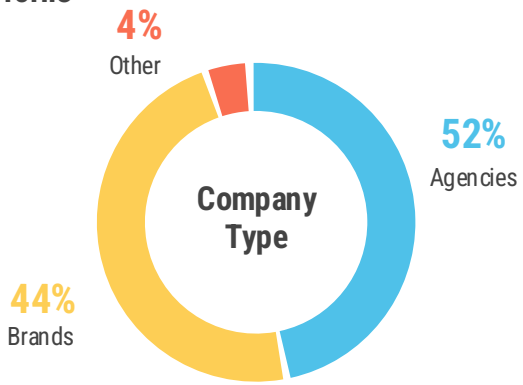
Methodology

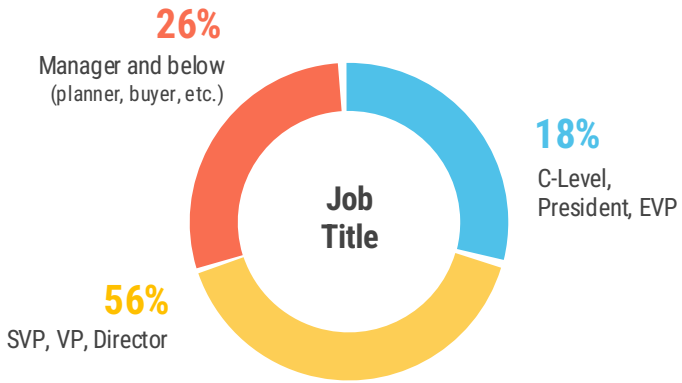
Email survey sent to U.S. buy-side ad investment decision-makers, primarily at brands and agencies

Field dates: 7/17/26-7/31/26

n=211

Respondent Profile





About IAB

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) empowers the media and marketing industries to thrive in the digital economy. Its membership comprises more than 700 leading media companies, brands, agencies, and the technology firms responsible for selling, delivering, and optimizing digital ad marketing campaigns. The trade group fields critical research on interactive advertising, while also educating brands, agencies, and the wider business community on the importance of digital marketing.

In affiliation with the IAB Tech Lab, IAB develops technical standards and solutions. IAB is committed to professional development and elevating the knowledge, skills, expertise, and collaboration of the workforce across the industry. Through the work of its public policy office in Washington, D.C., the trade association advocates for its members and promotes the value of the interactive advertising industry to legislators and policymakers. Founded in 1996, IAB is headquartered in New York City.

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