



105 marketing plays for 2026

The B2C marketers' guide

Executive summary

If you've only got a minute right now, then here's the lowdown...

The B2C world has fractured. We are no longer marketing to a "United Kingdom", but to a "Tale of Two Britains" (Section 2): the "Cautious Majority" (71% of Gen Z) who will switch brands for a cheaper alternative, and the "Confident Affluent" (68% secure) who seek quality and values (Attest).

71%

of Gen Z would switch brands in favour of a cheaper alternative

Reaching either of these groups is harder than ever. TV reach for 16–24-year-olds is down to just 45% (Ofcom), and even then, we are experiencing the split-screen phenomenon, where that attention is divided simultaneously between TikTok, YouTube and other streaming services.

The old marketing model is broken, and so it's time to move on.

In 2026, these are the five pillars that your marketing efforts should be built on:



1 Accountability

The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) brings fines of up to 10% of global turnover for those found breaking consumer law (Play 12). "Drip pricing" is banned and "greenwashing" is a primary target (Play 14), meaning compliance is your new, non-negotiable foundation.

2 First-party data

With third-party cookies now unreliable and subject to a fragmented "user-choice" model, your greatest asset is the data you earn yourself (Play 1). This is the only reliable fuel for your marketing engine.

3 A unified customer experience

This data must be used to create a unified journey. This means moving from a siloed team structure to "Customer Journey Pods" (Play 9) focussed purely on Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) (Play 7).

4 The human and the machine

AI is the co-pilot for productivity (Play 18), while your team provides the 'human-only' skills of strategy and empathy (Play 22).

5 Provable trust

Where generic AI content floods platforms, use authentic user-generated content (UGC) not only to stand out, but to build your social proof (Play 13).

Some of these may already feel a world apart from where you are today, but fear not. This document is your step-by-step guide to clarity.

The new playbook

The good old marketing tactics no longer work; change is constant, consumer signals are contradictory, and now there's a new, heavy-hitting regulator watching our every move.

To win, we first have to understand the strange reality we're working in. As we pointed out in our intro, the biggest truth of 2026 is that we're no longer marketing to one United Kingdom; we're marketing to two.

On one side, you have the **"Cautious Majority"**. Driven by the cost-of-living squeeze, this is a world where value is king. And it's a world where 71% of Gen Z consumers will drop their favourite brand for a cheaper alternative without a second thought (Attest). They are focused, frugal, and force us to be ruthlessly competitive on price.

At the same time, there's the **"Confident Affluent"**. For high-earning households, their outlook is completely different. In this group, 68% of them feel financially secure and aren't watching the pennies as closely anymore (Attest). Instead, they're looking for real quality, service, and brands that align with their own values.

If you try to appeal to both of these groups with the same message then it won't get you anywhere, and if you target somewhere in between, well, it's a dead end. So be careful.

This divide is made even more complicated by the fact that reaching either of them is harder than ever. TV used to be a reliable source, but for young people today, it's a relic. Now, even if they are still watching, their attention has scattered across a universe of on-demand platforms, from ITVX and Channel 4 to Netflix. At the same time, they are likely scrolling through YouTube or TikTok, endlessly.

15%

Increase in revenue for popular on-demand streaming services
ITVX and Channel4

It's a complex situation, and our only real advantage lies in the data we can gather ourselves. As third-party cookies become optional and highly unreliable, our ability to build direct relationships and collect first-party data has gone from a "nice-to-have" to a core strategic asset. It's the only fuel we can fill our AI-powered personalisation engines with to deliver the 10-15% revenue lifts we need.

With the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) now in full force, it really puts the sting in the tail of the challenges marketers are facing. The rules have been rewritten, and this is the hand we've been dealt.

Ready? Let's go.



How to use this guide

This guide is designed to be modular, and to be digested and referred back to over the course of time. You don't need to read every page to get value. We've structured to help you find your own path via a theory vs practical analysis – strategic depth (Part 1 vs. Part 2) and via your own business's operational maturity (the tiering system).

Part 1

(The strategic map)

This is the high-level "what" and "why," covering your consumer, organisational structure, and budgeting.

Part 2

(The tactical playbook)

This is then where we dive-deep into the "how" for the specific channels (SEO, Social, Email, PPC).

We have graded every play to help you prioritise your resources:

Tier 1

Foundational

(The 2025 catch-up)

These are the non-negotiables. Compliance, data basics, and core efficiency. Do not skip or overlook these.

Tier 2

Strategic

(The 2026 standard)

These are the new baseline plays for high-performing teams. This is where you master personalisation and the new media mix.

Tier 3

Advanced

(The 2026+ advantage)

In this tier you are leading the way in your market. These are forward-thinking plays aimed to provide a competitive advantage – think agentic AI and truly optimised 1:1 journeys.

Who should read what?

For CMOs and Marketing Directors:

Focus: Executive Summary, Part 1 (Strategic Map), and Section 6 (Funding).

Action: Pay attention to Play 9 (Customer Journey Pods) and Play 12 (Compliance Strategy). Skim through Part 2 to understand where your team may need to upskill.

For Brand & Acquisition Leads:

Focus: Part 1 for context, and then go deep into Section 7.6 (PPC), 7.7 (Paid Social), and 7.3 (Organic Social).

Action: Your priority is Play 70 (Retail Media) and Play 82 (Meta Advantage+).

For E-commerce & Conversion Managers:

Focus: The "Unified Customer Experience" in Part 1, and then head to Section 7.9 (The E-commerce Playbook).

Action: Your immediate priority is Play 97 (Checkout Friction) and Play 12 (Drip Pricing Compliance).

For CRM & Retention Leads:

Focus: The "Trust" pillar in Part 1 is particularly important, as is Section 7.4 (Email/CRM) and 7.10 (Subscription/Churn).

Action: Play 1 (First-party data) really is your bible.



At Embryo, we're all about the data and insights we bring our clients and we're excited to extend those findings to a wider audience.

2026 is set to be one of the most exciting years for digital advertising. Yes, competition is fierce and there are many changes, but with a smart strategy and a true omni-channel approach, the opportunity has never been greater.

This marketer's guide combines our team's channel expertise and our proprietary Supertools data alongside hours of research into what works for B2C marketers. We cover all the channels, budgets and opportunities for 2026, so we hope you enjoy reading and using it as much as we enjoyed creating it.

As an agency we don't just want to show what we're capable of, we want businesses to be able to turn our insights into actual performance.

Any questions along the way, the Embryo team will be happy to advise and support.

James Guérin
Chief Commercial Officer



PART 1

The 2026 Strategic Map

This part covers the "what" and the "why" of your 2026 strategy. It's the high-level framework for building your revenue engine.



Section 2:

The consumer's revolution

The "Tale of Two Britains" and the scattering of attention across a dozen platforms have broken the old marketing model. Our job has thus changed from "mass marketing" to "mass personalisation."

But with the fragmentation of the third-party cookie, the data we need to personalise is harder to come by.

Problem? Well, actually no. This is, in fact, a good thing. It forces us to move from secretly tracking customers to overtly earning their data instead. Your first-party data strategy is now your entire marketing strategy, and your ability to segment this data is your primary competitive advantage.

Tier 1

Play 1. Build upon your first-party data

This is the non-negotiable – and there's a reason why we've made this number one. A 2026 marketing strategy cannot be built on a 2020 data foundation. You must create a thorough, compliant way to capture data directly from your audience.

- Audit your touchpoints: Where can a user give you their email? Is it just your checkout?
- Create the new value exchanges: Implement simple, high-value capture points. Not just a "sign up to our newsletter" pop-up, but things like:

"Get 10% off your first order."

"Get early access to our next product drop."

"Sign up for back-in-stock notifications."

Tip: Your single most valuable data asset is a customer account. Your goal is to drive "guest" checkouts to zero. Do this by sending your audience with a simple, compelling incentive (e.g., loyalty points, free delivery) for creating an account vs. the option of checking out as a guest.

Play 2. Start with simple segmentation

An email list with 10 million people on it is useless if all you do is send them all the same message. "Batch and blast" has to stop.

- Start with two segments: Your first move is to separate "Customers" (people who have bought) from "Prospects" (people who have not).

Create different journeys:

- Prospects: A welcome series focussed on your core value proposition, brand story, and provides a first-purchase incentive (e.g., "Welcome, here's 10% off").
- Customers: An onboarding series dedicated to educating them on your product, cross-selling, and building loyalty (e.g., "Thanks for your purchase, here's how to get the most from it").

Tip: The first email sent to a new subscriber sets the tone, confirms your value exchange, and should ask a simple question like "What are you shopping for?" to get your first piece of zero-party data (Play 3). It's the most important email you will ever send.

Tier 2

Play 3. Create value to build your zero-party data

First-party data is the data that you collect (e.g., email, purchase history).

Zero-party data is data that a customer proactively shares with you. And this is the gold dust for personalisation. Here's some ways in which you could do this:

- Ask, don't just track: Create two-way conversations that not just generate opportunities for customer engagement, but also provide you with data you can later segment.
- Quizzes: "Find your perfect (product/skin type/style)." The quiz output gives the user value, and the answers give you their preferences.
- Preference centres: Allow users to tell you what they want to hear about ("New arrivals only") and how often ("Once a week").
- Scalability note: For smaller businesses, this can be as simple as using "tags" or "custom fields" in your email marketing tool (like Mailchimp or Klaviyo). If a user completes a quiz and the "Beginner" tag is applied, you can easily build a segment for them.
- Act on it: If a user tells you they are a "Beginner," don't send them "pro-level" product recommendations. This simple act of listening and remembering helps build trust with your brand.

KPI to watch: Zero-Party Data (ZPD) Collection Rate. What percentage of new email subscribers also completed your onboarding quiz?

Play 4. Enter the new media mix (CTV & Audio)

You can't reach 16-24-year-olds on broadcast TV, so instead follow them where they are. That means via streams – both visually (CTV) and audibly (podcasts).

- Pilot a CTV campaign: Platforms like ITVX, Channel 4, and Netflix's ad-tier allow you to reach your audience through digital-style targeting (by postcode, interest, or even your own first-party data).
- Don't forget audio: Digital audio (podcasts and Spotify) is a high-engagement, low-distraction channel. And potentially less competitive and costly than other advertising channels.
- Measure differently: Don't measure CTV or Audio on "last-click" sales. Use them for brand lift.

Scalability note: While large brands pilot Netflix ad-tiers, smaller businesses can enter this space cost-effectively. "Digital Audio" (running ads on niche podcasts) or local CTV (via platforms like Sky AdSmart, which lets you target specific postcodes) can be tested with much smaller budgets.



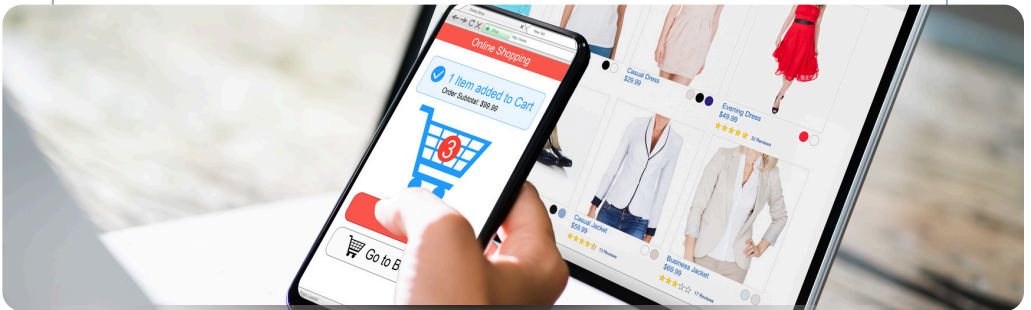
Tier 3

Play 5. Dual-strategy personalisation

This is how you tackle and win the "Tale of Two Britains." Use your (now clean) data to create two different marketing strategies without alienating either group.

- Identify your segments: Use your data (purchase history, AOV, engagement) to identify your "Confident Affluent" (high AOV, buys full price) and your "Cautious Majority" (discount-driven, high-churn risk).
 - Confident Affluent: Messaging to this group should target value, not price. Focus on quality, newness, exclusivity, and brand values (e.g., sustainability). The goal is to build loyalty and increase CLV.
 - Cautious Majority: Messaging to this population should be all about price, not value. Focus on offers, "Buy One, Get One," value bundles, and "price-lock" guarantees. Your goal is to win the transaction.

Tip: This strategy should inform your entire e-commerce experience and your retention offers.



Play 6. Create predictive audiences

Stop reacting to customer behaviour and start predicting it. Make the most of the AI built into your CDP/CRM (most modern platforms have this).

Create two predictive models:

- "Likely to churn": This AI model finds the behavioural "tells" of a customer who is about to leave. You can then proactively enrol them in a "win-back" campaign before they're gone.
- "Likely to buy": This model predicts which prospects are most likely to make their first purchase. You can then focus your ad spend or a more aggressive offer on this high-value group.

Scalability note: Enterprise brands will use complex CDPs for this. However, many e-commerce platforms (like Shopify) and email tools (like Klaviyo) have this predictive functionality built-in or available as an affordable app. You don't need a data science team; you just need to activate the feature.

Section 3:

The unified customer experience

For years there's been a constant battle between "brand" and "performance." Well, that (pointless) fight is finally over. The winner? Your customer. The only thing that matters now is owning the end-to-end customer experience.

With the fragmentation of cookie tracking, your first-party data is king. 80% of consumers say they're more likely to buy from a brand that delivers the hyper-personalisation this data enables (Deloitte).

80%

of consumers are more likely to buy from a brand that offers hyper personalisation.

The problem is, our old, channel-siloed team structures (Email team, Social team, PPC team) make this really difficult to deliver a unified experience from a divided team. That's why businesses must start organising their teams by the customer journey, and not by channel.



A CMO's note on the cultural barrier:

Shifting to a journey-based model sounds great on paper, but your biggest challenge is cultural, not structural. You will need to break the age-old "brand vs. performance" mindset, as these teams have, until now, had different metrics (brand awareness vs. ROAS) and different points of view (long-term vs. instant).

So, getting them to work together on a single budget is going to be tough. However, the way to do this is by giving them a single, shared metric that requires their co-dependence – and that metric is Customer Lifetime Value (CLV).

Tier 1

Play 7. Establish CLV as your ultimate metric

Before you restructure, you outline what success looks like. Stop reporting on channel-specific "vanity metrics" and align your department on just one number.

- Review your KPIs: Does the brand team report on "reach" while the e-commerce team reports on "ROAS"?
- Unite metrics: Establish Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) as the primary KPI for the entire team.
- Build a dashboard: Create a single shared dashboard that shows how "brand" activities (e.g., high-value content) and "retention" activities (e.g., community) directly impact CLV.

KPI to watch: Customer Lifetime Value (CLV). All other KPIs (CPA, AOV, Churn Rate) are just inputs that feed into it.

Play 8. Define your "In-House" vs. "Partner" model

You cannot be an expert in everything, and to cover everything requires a team of diverse skills. The smart play is to build an internal team that owns the core of your brand and partner with specialists who bring that top-level execution.

Essential in-house:

- Brand soul and strategy: The purpose, voice, and identity of your brand are pivotal. This must be owned internally.
- Customer data and insights: Your first-party data (Play 1) is your gold. The team managing your customer data platform and uncovering insights must be internal.
- Community and loyalty: The direct, human relationship with your superfans must be authentic and in-house.

Strategic Partners:

- Creator ecosystem management: Identifying and managing a diverse portfolio of creators, at scale, is a significant time-resource. A partner can bring those tools and relationships together for you.
- Commerce and retail media: The retail media landscape (Amazon, Tesco, etc.) has become its own technical universe. If you need to play here, look to partner with dedicated teams who can manage this complexity for you.
- Creative and production: If you're operating at large-scale, complex brand campaigns that really cut through the noise often need the touch of partners to build and execute those true 'hero' moments.

Tier 2

Play 9. Create "Customer Journey Pods"

This is the new operating system, where your sales and marketing teams become integrated into agile "pods" that own a specific stage of the customer journey – not just a channel.

Scalability note: For large organisations, this is a formal restructure. For a small team (or a solo marketer), this is a mindset shift. Instead of "doing social media" on Monday and "email" on Tuesday, you structure your week by the journey: 'Acquisition' (Mon/Tues), 'Conversion' (Weds), and 'Loyalty' (Thurs/Fri). You are the 'pod'.

- Brand and acquisition pod: Blends brand strategy, top-of-funnel content, and performance marketing. Their single goal is to attract high-value customers.
- Commerce and conversion pod: Optimises the path to purchase, from the website/app UX to the e-commerce platform and checkout. Their goal is to maximise conversion rate and Average Order Value (AOV).
- Loyalty and advocacy pod: Drives CLV. This pod manages the CRM, loyalty programs, and community, with the goal of turning customers into repeat buyers and brand advocates.

Tip: A "pod" represents an autonomous team with a shared budget, a shared dashboard, and a single shared KPI (e.g., "Cost-effective new customer growth" or "CLV"). It's not a group that just meets weekly for a check-in on their to-do list.

Play 10. Embed new specialist roles into your pods

As the team structures change, new roles have emerged. Consider embedding these "specialists" within your journey pods, rather than them being siloed in their own department.

- Creator partnership manager: If you have capacity/need in-house to manage this, embed this role in your brand and acquisition pod. Their job is to organise your creator economy for authentic, large-scale reach.
- Commerce media manager: Embed this role in your commerce and conversion pod. Their job is to control the Retail Media Networks (RMNs) and make sure you win at the checkout.
- Community manager: Their job is to build and nurture the human-to-human relationships that create brand "superfans". Embed this role in your loyalty and advocacy pod.

Scalability note: Large companies will hire for these roles. Smaller teams should see these as "hats" to be worn by existing team members, not new hires. For example, your "Community Manager" might also be your "Creator Partnership Manager," dedicating a few hours a week to each 'role'.

Tier 3

Play 11. Build a unified MarTech and data stack

Whilst building your pod structure is important, it's only as good as the data it runs on. The real goal is for your data and tech to align and therefore provide you with a unified view of your customer.

- Invest in a CDP: A Customer Data Platform (CDP) unifies data from your website, app, CRM, and in-store POS to create that single source of truth.
- Partner with your CIO/CTO: You must co-own the data infrastructure that allows your pods to see the entire customer journey – it's impossible to achieve this on your own.
- Deliver 1:1 personalisation: 80% of consumers expect a personalised experience from a brand (Deloitte). By unifying your tech stack, it will turn your big data into smaller, useful insights and create many segmentation opportunities.

Scalability note: Enterprise brands will invest heavily in CDPs, but for the small business, the equivalent is simply integrating your core tools. For example, does your e-commerce site (e.g., Shopify) talk directly to your emailing tool (e.g., Klaviyo)? Does your quiz tool (e.g., Typeform) pass through its data to your email list (e.g., via Zapier)? That "unified stack" approach for an SME ensures that your customer data isn't trapped in silos.



Section 4:

Building trust

The market is quickly being saturated with AI-generated content that's making it hard to distinguish one brand from another. When this happens, the only thing you have on your side is your level of "trust". And by trust, we don't mean like a "vibe" but in a legal and commercial standing.

The DMCCA has clamped down on false advertising and particularly "greenwashing" and fake reviews (CMA). The penalty is up to 10% of global turnover if you get it wrong (Cooley LLP). So, de-risk your brand legally and build your brand authentically.



Tier 1

Play 12. Turn DMCCA Compliance into an advantage

You must be compliant, there's no option here, but the smart play is to turn this defensive, legal-led task into an offensive, marketing-led message of trust.

De-risk ('must do'):

- Ban "drip pricing": Audit your entire checkout flow. Are all compulsory fees (e.g., booking fees, service charges) included in the "up-front" price? If not, you are breaking the law.
- Monitor your reviews: You are now legally responsible for the reviews on your site. You must have a system to proactively remove and block fake reviews.
- Fix your subscriptions: The "unsubscribe" button must be as easy to find and use as the "subscribe" button.

The 'smart' play: Once you are compliant, why not shout about it?

- Add a "No hidden fees, ever" badge to your checkout.
- Add a "Real reviews, by real customers" trustmark to your review section.

Tip: This is a point of brand differentiation you can really build on. You put the customer and their experience first, and you can prove it.

Play 13. Create authentic user-generated content (UGC)

Perfect brand photography that you've probably paid a fair amount to create looks great, but unfortunately it's fast becoming ineffective.

- Start simple: Create a branded hashtag (e.g., #MyBrandStyle) and get your customers to use it in their post-purchase social posts.
- Get the rights: Next, through the use a simple tool like Taggbox or Yotpo, or by developing a manual process, ask for permission to use a customer's photo.

Once you have authority, use it everywhere:

- On your product pages (e.g., "See how it looks in a real home").
- In your email marketing.
- In your paid social ads.

Tip: The goal is creating authenticity, not perfection. A slightly blurry, real-world photo is infinitely more trustworthy than that perfect studio shot.

Tier 2

Play 14. Go from "Greenwashing" to "Green-proving"

Making vague claims about being "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" is not just frowned upon by your customer base, but is actually a legal issue under the CMA. You must adapt from making "claims" to actually showing your proof.

- Audit your claims: Go through your entire site and remove any "green" claim that you can't back up.
- Be specific: Change phrases like "sustainable" with more thorough, and accurate details such as "Made from 30% recycled materials" or "This product's carbon footprint is 2.1kg CO₂, and we've offset it via [Partner]."
- Use your packaging: Where appropriate, use on-pack QR codes that link to a "transparency page" on your website. On that page you would then provide information on your supply chain, your carbon footprint, and your (honest) progress towards sustainability.

Tip: Be honest about your journey: "We're not perfect, but here's our plan to reducing our packaging waste by 2027." The honesty you have about your failures or progress towards environmental challenges creates real trust with your audience.

Play 15. Set up a "Creator-as-Partner" program

The "creator" has now become your new, authentic brand partner, and it's how you build a long-term, paid partnership with niche, credible creators who actually love your product that are generating the best results.

- Find creators in your niche (from 10k to 50k followers) who already use or talk about your product.
- Offer your creator/s a 6-month / 12-month paid partnership and treat them as if they're a part-time brand manager.
- Set them off with a clear brief and let them create content in their own voice. Their audience trusts them because of their voice, so don't interfere.

KPI to watch: Engagement Rate and Cost-per-Impression (CPM), not just "reach." A niche creator's engaged audience is far more valuable to you in the long-run.



Tier 3

Play 16. Be transparent

Buyers are really tired of brands that claim to be flawless, so this is your chance to build their trust by being completely honest

- Show the "how": Create short-form video content (TikTok, Reels) that go "behind-the-scenes" in processes like showing the people who pack their orders, how the product is made, or of a team meeting where you discussed a new feature.
- Write a blog or email labelled "One thing we got wrong last year." Share that problem, the failed solution, and the lesson learnt.
- "This product is amazing for [X], but it's not the right choice if you need [Y]. For that, we'd recommend [Other Product]."

Tip: The logic behind this is simple: "If they are this honest about what they're bad at, I can trust what they say they're good at."

Tier 3

Play 17. Build a true brand community

The ultimate form of trust and retention is from within your community. This is a "gated" space where your best customers can talk to each other, and not just you.

- Choose your platform: This could be a private Slack channel, a "Close Friends" list on Instagram, or even a private Facebook Group.
- Be the host, not the salesperson: Your job is to start the conversation. Post articles, ask questions, and start debates that are relevant to the lifestyle of your customer (not your product). Never, ever sell.
- Reward them: Give your community members exclusive access:
 - First look at new products.
 - A private virtual "meet the founder" Q&A.
 - Community-only discounts.

Tip: The value of your community comes from members talking to one another. This is the strongest retention play for subscription-based products.



Section 5:

The human and the machine

AI, in the last few years, has evolved rapidly from niche experimentation to a tool that marketers wouldn't know how to live without. But a gap has emerged between use and scaled value. While 88% of organisations are now using AI in at least one business function, the majority are still in the early stages of scaling it.

62%

of companies are in the 'experimenting' or 'piloting' phase



AI is not yet a "magic button." And its potential is actually only as good as the quality of the data, the strategy, and the team using it. The job as a marketer has evolved from the "doer" to the "orchestrator" – the human provides the creative brief and "trains" the AI to optimise its output. It's a whole new skill set, and while your team doesn't need to be geeks to work it, they need to be fluent with AI.

A leader's note on change management AI adoption is the biggest human challenge you'll face right now, as it requires your team to proactively get stuck in an upskill – whether they want to or not. AI is challenging marketers' professional identities and is causing anxiety about their future job security.

Introduce AI as a tool to augment your team, not replace them. Their willingness to embrace it is directly proportional to their trust in you. AI is not here to replace the marketer; it's here to replace the mundane. It is a "co-pilot" that automates 80% of the jobs we hate (pulling reports, writing multiple ad variations, and segmenting lists) to free us up for the 20% of our job that only a human can do: strategy, creativity, customer empathy, and building a brand that people love.

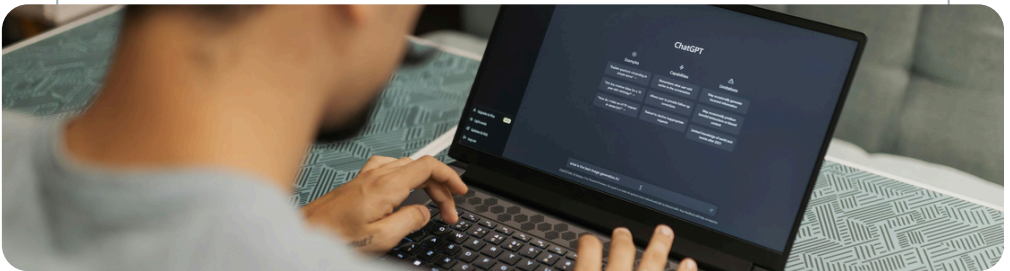
Tier 1

Play 18. Use AI to scale productivity

If your team isn't using AI for daily tasks, you are already behind. It's already become the baseline for efficiency.

- Get licenses: Your whole marketing team should be operating on "Pro" licenses for your chosen AI tool (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini).
- Create a prompt library: Create a shared "Prompt Library" with 10-20 proven prompts for your business:
 - "Act as our B2C Brand Voice: [Paste Guidelines]"
 - "Turn this blog post into 10 TikTok video ideas."
- Train: Run a "lunch and learn" where team members share their best prompts.

Tip: The biggest win right now is content repurposing. Use AI to "Act as a Social Media Manager" and turn one customer review into 10 social posts, 5 email headlines, and 3 ad copy variations. What would previously have taken you hours to create can now be achieved in minutes.



Play 19. Activate AI-powered product recommendations

This is the simplest, highest-ROI personalisation play you can run. If you aren't already doing this then you must.

- Activate your e-commerce AI: Most platforms now have this built-in or it will be available as a simple app (e.g., Shopify, Magento, Salesforce).
- Implement "smart" carousels: Go beyond "Newest Products." Your product pages, checkout page, and emails must have:
 - "Customers who bought this also bought..." (Cross-sell)
 - "You might also like..." (Personalised discovery)
 - "Complete the look" (Upsell)

Tip: This is the core tactical play for AOV growth. It's also a key feature in AI-driven email campaigns and paid social (Advantage+ Catalog Ads).

Tier 2

Play 20. Use AI to generate personalised experiences

This is the next step. Instead of just personalising products, you can start personalising the entire experience based on the segments you built in (Play 5).

- Use dynamic content: Use your CRM/CDP's AI to show different content to different segments.
- Website: Show a "Welcome, here's 10% off" banner to Prospects and a "Shop our new arrivals" banner to Customers.
- Email: Use one "master" email template, but the AI dynamically swaps the hero image and call-to-action based on whether the user is in your "Confident Affluent" or "Cautious Majority" segment.

Scalability note: This is an advanced feature in an enterprise CDP. So, for smaller businesses, this is often a built-in feature of modern email platforms (e.g., showing dynamic content blocks in an email based on a user's 'tags').

KPI to watch: Conversion Rate by Segment. You're aiming for a dramatically higher rate for your personalised segments.

Play 21. Use AI as a creative assistant

Your ad campaigns (Meta, TikTok) are often exposed to black-box AI algorithms. And equally AI is the best way to feed the machine with the volume and variety of creative it needs to find and attract that person within your audience.

- Ideation: Use AI to think of 20 different "hooks" for a TikTok ad.
- Variation: Use AI to then create 10 different versions of your best-performing ad: change the background, change the headline, change the call-to-action.
- Test and test again: Feed all of those 10 variations to Meta's Advantage+ or Google's PMax and let the algorithm find the winner. Your job is no longer to guess which the best ad is; it's to test your way to it.

Tip: This is what we'll discuss as the "Human-in-the-Loop" workflow. The human provides the strategy and gold-standard creative; the AI provides the scale.

Play 22. Make your “humans” your advantage

As AI takes over the “doing,” your team’s value is in the things that AI cannot replicate.

AI can run a PMax campaign, but the human within the team must be the one who decides which market to enter in the first place, decide on what the core value proposition is, and create clear structure on what the brand stands for.

Tip: Create a “human skills” development plan for your team. Replace “learn X tool” with goals like “present a strategic market analysis” or “lead a customer feedback session.” It’s not just about having a tool that makes a marketer smarter, but actually in what they can use it for.

- Lock in on empathy: Train your team to read customer reviews, listen to support calls, and spend time within your community. AI will analyse sentiment, but only a human can feel genuine empathy and figure out the “why” behind a customer’s problem.

Play 23. Get into Agentic AI

AI agents, systems that are capable of autonomously planning and executing multiple steps, are already being adopted.

The latest data shows that 62% of organisations are already at least experimenting with AI agents, and 23% have begun scaling them.

For “AI high performers,” the number is even higher: 29% are already scaling or have fully scaled agents in Marketing and Sales (McKinsey).

62%

of organisations are
experimenting with AI agents

23%

of organisations have begun
scaling with AI agents

- Action: Stop “getting ready” and start deploying. Identify a high-value, multi-step marketing workflow and begin building an agentic system to manage it.
- Start with: “Analyse our top customer segments, identify high-churn-risk users, and autonomously add them to a three-part ‘win-back’ email and ad campaign.”

Tip: Your competitors are no longer “piloting” this, they are using it to scale their business and for the biggest businesses this is going to be a key differentiator for 2026.

Tier 3

Play 24. Pilot AI-driven 1:1 journeys

This is where AI moves from personalising for a “segment” to personalising for an individual (1:1).

- What it is: Your AI pulls together a unique (1:1) marketing journey for every single customer based on their individual behaviours.

Example workflow:

- “User A” visits your site, looks at “blue dresses,” and then leaves.
- The AI autonomously decides the “next best action” is to send them an email two hours later, not with a generic “You left this!” message, but with a dynamically generated hero image featuring other blue dresses that you have available, offering a 10% off code, along with a UGC image of a customer wearing a blue dress.

Tip: This is pretty complex, so pilot this with a small, high-value segment first (e.g., “High-AOV cart abandoners”) and prove the ROI before scaling it.



Section 6:

Funding 2026

When preparing your budget, think in three buckets ("**Invest**," "**Experiment**," and "**Divest**") that map to your business maturity.

Strategic spend (The "Experiment" bucket: c. 20–30%)

This is your R&D budget for growth. With over 87% of ad spend now online in key sectors (eMarketer), this is where you fund your Tier 2 and 3 plays to build your future advantage.

What it funds: The four key growth areas:

- Connected TV (CTV): 56% of marketers are increasing spend here to reach audiences in their living rooms.
- Retail media networks (RMNs): 65% of marketers see RMNs as crucial for getting in front of customers at the digital point of sale.
- Short-form video: The number one content format where marketers are increasing investment.
- Creator and influencer marketing: 92% of brands are increasing their creator spend to build trust.

Funding the future (The "Divest" bucket: c. 10%)

We all have that martech tool no one uses or that legacy channel that's no longer pulling its weight. Cutting this 10% is what funds your "Experiment" bucket.

What to cut: Run a "cost vs. ROI" audit. That campaign with a sky-high Cost Per Acquisition (CPA) compared to the benchmark? Get rid. That legacy media buy with no attributable data? Cut it. Examples include unmeasured print spend, programmatic display with low viewability, or "boosted" social posts that aren't tied to a funnel.

Foundational spend (The "Invest" bucket: c. 60–70%)

This is your core budget. It's not just 'keeping the lights on'; it's doubling down on what works and fixing what's broken.

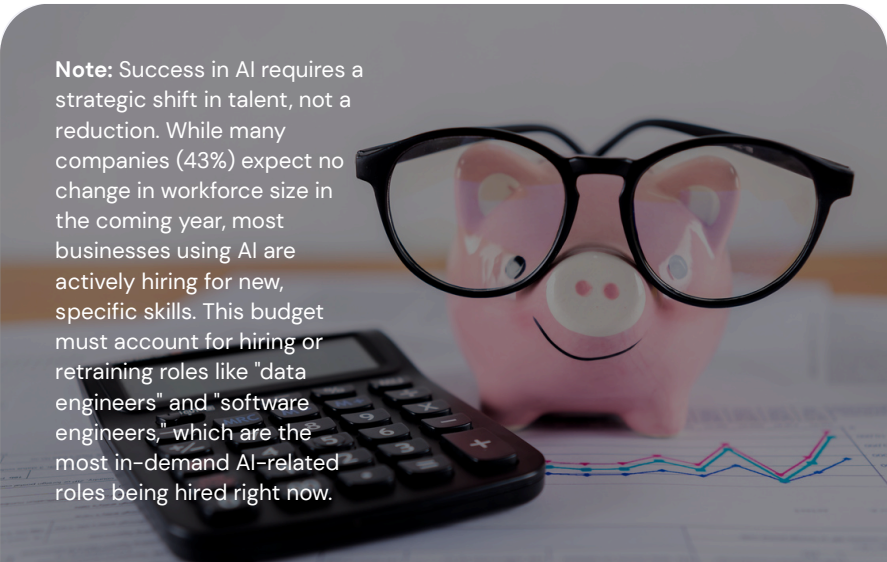
- **What it funds:** Your Tier 1 plays. This is your core tech stack (CDP, Email/CRM), your server-side tagging (Play 62), your first-party data capture strategy (Play 1), and, most importantly, ensuring your entire e-commerce and marketing operation is DMCCA-compliant (Play 12).

Sample 2026 B2C Budget Allocation

Create an agile budget that remains focused on where the customer is now. Here's an example of what a digital-first budget for 2026 could look like:

Category	Allocation	Key Focus (CFO-Friendly Language)
Paid Media	35%	Transfer budget away from less efficient traditional search/social activities and move it into high-growth RMNs, CTV, and short-form video.
Content and creator marketing	22.5%	Invest in creator partnerships (Play 15) as our authentic "voice" and SEO-driven content to lower long-term acquisition costs.
CRM and retention	17.5%	Increase your investment in loyalty (Play 17), community, and personalisation (Play 19) - retaining a customer is 5x cheaper than acquiring a new one.
People and technology	25%	Fund your core in-house team (Play 8) and build your AI-driven data stack (CDP, Analytics) required for efficient and personalised marketing.

Note: Success in AI requires a strategic shift in talent, not a reduction. While many companies (43%) expect no change in workforce size in the coming year, most businesses using AI are actively hiring for new, specific skills. This budget must account for hiring or retraining roles like "data engineers" and "software engineers," which are the most in-demand AI-related roles being hired right now.





PART 2

The tactical playbook

The previous sections defined the high-level strategy. This part now provides the "how" and "where" for your individual channel teams.

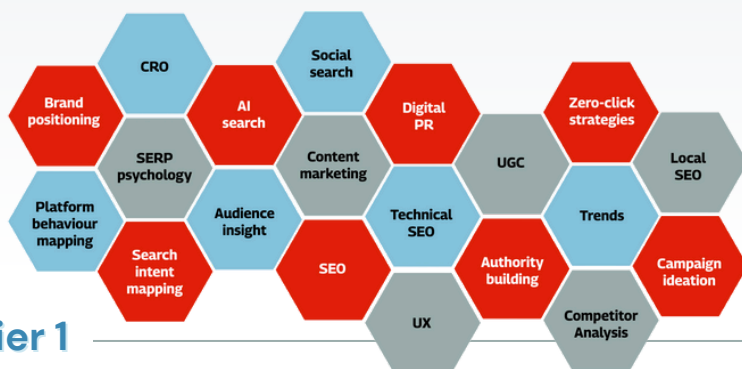
Jump to the channels most relevant to your role.

Section 7.1

SEO: From rankings to total visibility

For years, the goal was simple: rank number one – now that achievement is no longer enough. The Search Engine Results Page (SERP) has evolved from 10 blue links into a mix of AI Overviews (AIOs), Reddit discussions, "People Also Ask" boxes, and various other SERP features.

Because of this we would argue that ranking number one is no longer the core metric for SEO, we need to focus on "Share of SERP". To do this you must ensure your brand is visible at multiple touch points within the SERP, which could be the traditional 10 blue links, a brand mentioned on a PR listicle that ranks on the first page, or even an image with your product featured.



Tier 1

Play 25. Stop chasing "What is..." keywords

Diversifying the mix of keywords you target is more important than ever. The TOFU traffic you used to be able to guarantee by targeting informational keywords is more scarce than ever due to "zero-click" searches (now 69% of all searches, BrightEdge).

- Problem: AIOs trigger on 58% of informational queries, and a number one ranking no longer guarantees a click (Semrush).
- Pivot: Stop creating generic "What is..." articles. Refocus content on high-intent, high-experience keywords that AI can't easily answer.

New content focus:

- Comparisons: "Product X vs. Product Y" (formatted as tables).
- Case Studies: "How we achieved [Result]."
- "Experience" (E-E-A-T): "We tested five [products], here's the winner."

KPI to watch: Conversion Rate. You'd much rather 100 visitors on your site with a 5% conversion rate, than 1,000 visitors with just a 0.1% conversion rate.

Play 26. Master technical SEO

Google's updates have made technical SEO a true must; as a slow, clunky, or untrustworthy site can struggle to perform well in the SERP, even if the content is good.

- Load speeds under three seconds: Over half of mobile users (53%) will drop off a site if it takes longer than three seconds to load. In fact, even a one-second delay on your site could result in a drop in conversions by 7% (Google).
- Double down on mobile-first: 55% of UK transactions are on mobile – you can't alienate them through a poor user experience (eMarketer).



Play 27. Optimise your local SEO (GBP)

For any brand with a physical footprint, ensuring your brand is visible in local packs should be an important part of your strategy. 46% of all Google searches have local intent (Google).

- Optimise your Google Business Profile (GBP): This is your new "homepage" for local customers.
- Systematise review generation: 90% of consumers read reviews (Google). Actively ask every happy customer to leave a review on your GBP.
- Use photos and posts: Listings with high-quality photos drive 42% more requests for directions (Google). Use the "Posts" feature weekly.

Tier 2

Play 28. Own the "Share of SERP"

Relying on a single organic listing is no longer viable. Instead, you need to, or at least aim to, take up as much space as possible on the first page of Google by targeting multiple features across the SERP.

- The distributed web: Google is using community sentiment (like Reddit) and visual media as signals for relevance. You must win the conversation everywhere, not just on your site.

Action:

- Video packs: Embed short-form videos on your blogs and across social platforms to try and rank in the "Short Video" carousel on Google.
- Discussions: Have an active, non-salesy presence on Reddit and forums. Google now prioritises "Hidden Gems" from forums for authentic answers.
- Image packs: Use high-quality (original) photography to appear in visual search results.

Goal: When a user searches for your key term, you want them to see your paid ad, organic listing, YouTube video, etc. which mentions your brand.

Play 29. Evolve from SEO to AEO (Answer Engine Optimisation)

There is still benefit to targeting AI Overviews, and while they may not result in a click they can be a good way of building brand awareness.

- Disconnect: Only 20–26% of AIO-cited sources are also in the top 10 organic results (Semrush). AIOs love clear, authoritative answers, even from lower-authority sites.

How to win the citation:

- Scannable structure: Use clear, question-based headings (H2s, H3s).
- Answer first: Provide a direct answer immediately below the heading (approx. 40–50 words).
- Data tables: LLMs digest structured tabular data much faster than text paragraphs. Where possible, format product comparisons or specs into HTML tables to increase your chances of being the featured snippet or AI answer.

Play 30. Build up your E-E-A-T

Google's E-E-A-T framework (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness) is more important than ever in an AI world.

- Prioritise "Experience": This is the one thing AI can't replicate. How to show "Experience":
 - Real authorship: Use real author bylines that link to an author page detailing their credentials.
 - Original visuals: Use real (your own) photos and videos (e.g., "our team testing the product") instead of stock images.
 - First-person language: Write from a first-person perspective ("We tested..." "In my experience...").

Tip: Build your content strategy around your in-house experts. Your product designers and customer support leads are now your best content creators.



Play 31. Leverage review schema for trust

Use your DMCCA compliance (Play 12) as an SEO weapon. The DMCCA bans fake reviews, and Google wants to see proof of verification.

How to win:

- Be transparent: Do not suppress negative reviews. Responding to them professionally builds more trust.
- Use review schema: Mark up your authentic reviews to get stars in the SERPs.

Tip: This is a perfect example of how legal compliance and SEO strategy are now the same thing. Being "DMCCA-proof" is your E-E-A-T strategy.

Tier 3

Play 32. Target 'Emotional Search'

Consumers increasingly search for relief from their everyday hassles, rather than purely functional keywords. When a shopper searches "best anti-frizz serum," they're feeling a bit fed up with the humidity and want to avoid a bad hair day, not just researching ingredients.

You must connect your content directly to the consumer's root emotional state to stand out.

- The shift: Move beyond keyword density to focus on real-world empathy. Your content should subtly acknowledge the consumer's emotional struggle or desire before offering your product as the solution.

Action:

- Identify the emotion: For your top commercial keywords, identify the core consumer pain point (e.g., a bit of a faff, relief, a splurge, curiosity, necessity, saving the planet).
- Headlines: Rewrite your H1s and title tags to speak to the feeling in a relatable tone.
 - Instead of: "5 Best Bedroom Organisation Products"... Try: "Finally, Sort Out the Spare Room: 5 Bits of Kit to Cure the Clutter" (Addressing the feeling of domestic overwhelm/procrastination).
- Validate their pain: Start your content by validating the consumer's frustration, maybe even use a hint of dry wit if that fits your brand tone, but make sure to avoid using overly dramatic language (e.g., "We know how much of a palaver it is when your delivery is late...")

Tip: Your customer reviews and social media channels are a goldmine for this. They reveal the first-hand, understated language consumers use to describe their problems.



Download our
Organic Playbook



Hear from the experts...



Consumers don't browse the internet the way they used to, and the shift is especially dramatic in B2C. Most product discovery starts in places designed for inspiration, and this isn't only on Google any more. People now go to social media, online forums and LLMs for these types of searches, and we as marketers need to be mindful of this.

People use these platforms differently: TikTok explains. Pinterest inspires. Reddit validates. YouTube demonstrates. Instagram reassures.

However, people are learning behaviours off these different platforms and using them across all platforms, so we need to understand these behaviours. We're also seeing that the intent behind B2C discovery is increasingly tied to confidence, identity, aesthetics and feelings. Brands that speak this language win.

This means traditional SEO can't be the only lever. B2C brands need an organic strategy that lives where people are actually searching and speaks to the emotion they're searching in the first place.

Jess Atkinson
Organic Search Director



Section 7.2

Digital PR: The new earned trust

Between generic AI content being plastered everywhere and a consumer trust remaining low (only 35% of UK adults trust the news, Reuters), Digital PR can no longer be seen just as the link-building function. It is now the primary engine for building E-E-A-T (Play 30) and your goal is to build a brand so trustworthy that Google's AI and your customers cite you as the source of truth.

E The content should demonstrate that the creator has first-hand, practical, or life experience with the topic.

E The content creator should exhibit deep knowledge or skill in the subject matter being presented.

A The website and its creators should have a recognized reputation as a reliable and respected source within their industry or field.

T The page and website must be accurate, honest, safe, and reliable, which is considered the most critical component.

Tier 1

Play 33. Lean on your in-house experts

Generic AI content has no value. Genuine human expertise does, and it should become your ultimate competitive advantage. Journalists are actively seeking non-AI, expert commentary.

- Stop ghostwriting. Identify your real Subject Matter Experts – your product designers or lead customer service rep.

Workflow:

- Interview them.
- Use AI (Play 18) to then transcribe and pull out five insightful quotes from your conversation.
- Use these quotes to pitch to journalists where appropriate.

Tip: Your expert's "who" (their credentials, their real-world "Experience") is now as important as the "what" (their quote).

Play 34. Make any excuse for short-form video

Your PR "asset" is no longer just a press release. Short-form video is the primary ROI format for marketers (GWI).

- Action: Every PR campaign should include a video component.

Workflow:

- Campaign launch: Create a 30-second video for your campaign.
- Journalist outreach: Send the video alongside your press release.
- Social amplification: Post it natively on TikTok, Reels, and Shorts (Play 42).

Tip: Use AI to turn your press release into five different video scripts. This makes your "big idea" digestible for journalists and social algorithms.

Tier 2

Play 35. Use AI as your strategic assistant

AI is not only a content writer but a workflow accelerator. 91% of PR professionals who use AI say it speeds up their work (Cision).

Workflow:

- Human: Defines the strategy, finds the unique data point, and interviews the expert (Play 33).

AI: Does the "heavy lifting":

- "Analyse this data and find three surprising trends."
- "Build a media list of 20 journalists who write about [topic]."
- "Draft five personalised pitch variations for this expert quote."

Tip: This is the "Human + Machine" engine. AI handles 80% of the mundane work, freeing you (the human) up for the 20% high-value work: strategy and relationships.

Play 36. Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO)

This is the new "Link Building." As Google's AI writes its own answers, your goal is to be the trusted source the AI cites.

- Goal: Your new #1 placement is the citation inside the AI Overview.
- Strategy: Your goal with PR is to get your brand, expert, and data cited in high-authority media sources that the AI reads and trusts (e.g., BBC, The Guardian, and key industry journals).

Tip: Work with your Affiliate team. Their deep-dive reviews on third-party sites are often the 'Experience' sources that AI engines prefer to cite.

Tier 3

Play 37. Get over "digital fatigue"

Consumers are tired. They're weary of "AI-fakeness," algorithm-pleasing formulas, and being constantly sold to. 54% of ad-related online talk displays feelings of 'anger' (GWI).

- Your pivot opportunity: Shift your content from "selling" to "value."
- Action: Behave like a creator, not a business. Your content should aim to:
 - Entertain: (raw, authentic, funny)
 - Educate: (genuinely helpful, expert-led)
 - Inspire: (UGC, real success stories)

Tip: 61% of consumers trust creator content; only 38% trust brand content (CreatorIQ).
Your strategy should be to pay creators to be your authentic voice.



Play 38. Measure what matters (C-suite metrics)

Stop reporting on "Impressions" or "AVE" (Ad Value Equivalency). Your C-suite doesn't care, and they're right not to. You must connect your PR efforts to measurable business outcomes.

- Brand Sentiment and Share of Voice: Are more people talking about your brand and is that chatter positive?
- Search Impact: Did your campaign on [topic] lead to a lift in search rankings and overall traffic surrounding that topic?
- AI citations: How often is your brand/expert cited in AI Overviews?

KPI to watch: Revenue Attribution. Use unique promo codes, custom landing pages, and analytics to tie PR coverage directly to sales.

Hear from the experts...



Consumers can spot manufactured content a mile off. It is crucial for brands, experts and creators to show up with something genuinely useful to say. PR's job is to turn those voices into momentum, get your expertise into the stories AI reads, put your ideas into the feeds people actually consume, and prove the value of that work through share of search uplift. To do that well, brands need a setup that lets them move quickly, with expert content banks, fast approvals and creators who live in those moments.

Consistency is the real key here. One brand mention or one video won't change how consumers, Google or AI understand your brand. Brands need a steady drumbeat of credible voices, smart reactive moments and culturally relevant ideas.

When you show up consistently in the places your audience explores and trusts, you build presence. And over time, you become the brand people and algorithms reach for first.

Tom Hemingway
Head of Digital PR



Section 7.3

Organic social: The post-reach playbook

Social platforms are no longer "social media"; they're entertainment platforms, search engines, and commerce machines. You must now earn attention, not just seek it, by being authentic, creating a community, and getting really good at social commerce.



Tier 1

Play 39. Be noticed in the "attention economy"

Stop measuring "Likes." Likes are now irrelevant, accounting for just 5% of algorithmic weight on Instagram (GWI).

- Unlearn old habits: The algorithm now suppresses outbound links and overly promotional content.
- Prioritise conversations: Your strategy must move to: 1) Prioritising content from first-degree connections, 2) Using native formats (carousels, in-depth text) to maximise "dwell time", and 3) Spark meaningful conversation.

Tip: Create videos that are so good that people watch them twice, and/or go on to share them with a friend.

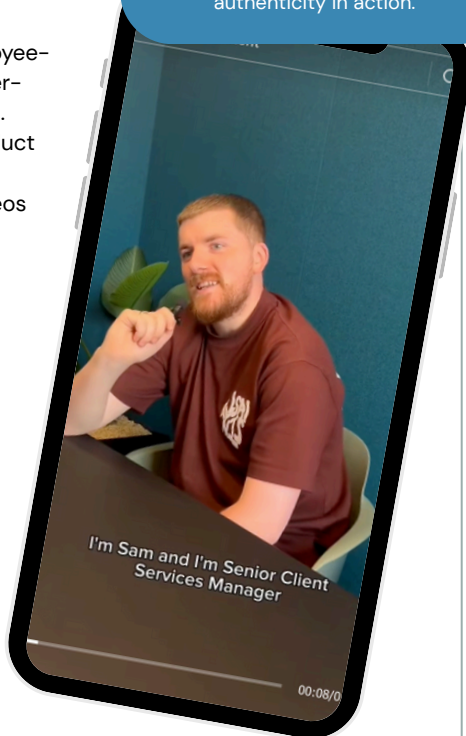
Play 40. Adopt a "video-first, authentic-only" mindset

76% of marketers report that authentic, low-production videos now outperforms high-budget content (GWI).

- **Mandate:** Stop trying to look perfect. Start trying to be real.
- **Action:** Your best content is "employee-generated content" (EGC) and "user-generated content" (UGC) (Play 13).
- **EGC:** Give your phone to your product team. "Show us how this is made."
- **UGC:** Reshare your customers' videos using your product.

For example: Introducing the names behind the accounts, and getting to know the different team members. Asking them about industry updates, top tips and best practices can be a more engaging way to speak about your services.

Tip: Your audience trusts real people, not logos. By following this mantra, you are demonstrating authenticity in action.



Play 41. Use AI as an idea generator

A third of social media professionals report burnout (Sprout Social). It's time to work smarter, not harder.

- **The AI Solution:** Use AI (Play 18) as your "guide," not as your "author."
 - "Act as a Gen Z social media manager. Give me 10 video hooks for our new running trainer launch."
 - "Read our last blog post and turn it into a five-part 'How-to' TikTok series."
 - "What are seven common myths about [my product] that I can bust?"

Tip: 83% of marketers say GenAI helps them create more content (Cision). Let AI generate the ideas so you can focus on the human part: filming and being authentic.

Tier 2

Play 42. Master "Social SEO"

39% of Gen Z now use TikTok/Instagram as their primary search tool; before Google (GWI). Therefore your social content is your new SEO.

Action: You must treat your captions and videos like you would your SEO-optimised webpages.

How to win:

- Keywords in captions: Write detailed, keyword-rich captions that answer questions.
- Keywords on screen: Use text overlays that state the keyword (e.g., "Best waterproof mascara").
- Keywords in audio: The algorithm can listen – so say your keywords in your voiceover.

Tip: Your SEO team's keyword research (Play 25) is now a direct input for your social media content calendar.

Play 43. The "hub and spoke" video model

The "short vs. long" isn't a debate. You need both, for different jobs.

- The "spoke" (discovery): The goal of super-short videos (7-12 seconds) on TikTok/Reels is reach. This is your "trailer" or "hook" designed to stop the scroll and introduce your brand.
- The "hub" (trust): The goal of long-form videos (>60 seconds) on YouTube or your website is to create authority. These are commonly in-depth tutorials, an expert interview, or the behind-the-scenes docs that build trust and community.

Tip: Film one 10-minute "Hub" video. Then, use AI to help you chop it into ten 9-second "Spoke" videos for TikTok (Opus Clip will do a cracking job at this for you).

Play 44. Frictionless social commerce

69% of marketers agree more shopping will soon happen on social platforms rather than on websites (GWI).

- Mandate: Don't just rely on social media driving traffic to your site. Instead, protect yourself by using social media as the store itself.
- Action: Go all-in on TikTok Shop and Instagram Shopping (where you can). Upload your product catalogue. Take a user from discovery to purchase without them ever leaving the app.

Tip: Every second you add to the customer journey (like loading an external site) is a chance to lose them. A seamless, in-app checkout is the ultimate conversion rate optimiser.

Tier 3

Play 45. Win on the niche platforms

While everyone fights on Instagram, your most valuable audience might actually be somewhere else. So go where your audience is, not just where the masses are.

- Reddit: Growing at 46% YoY (GWI), it's not a social network but a collection of high-intent niche forums. Here you must be helpful, not salesy.
- Pinterest: Growing 14.7% in the UK (GWI) alone, it's a visual search engine for high-intent product discovery (fashion, home, beauty, etc.).
- Noplace/Ten Ten: Where is Gen Z actually hanging out? Be the first brand to show up authentically on the new, niche apps. The risk is often worth the reward.

Tip: Assign around 10% of your organic social time to "listen and learn" on these niche platforms. Your goal is to be a community member, not a marketer.

Play 46. Prepare for "PG-13" content moderation

This is a critical UK-specific change where Instagram is rolling out a "parental control" system, like a "12A" cinema rating (Ofcom).

- Impact: Users under the age of 18 will be put into a more restrictive setting automatically.
- Risk: If your brand is classified within the "sensitive" categories like wellness, fitness, or lifestyle (even if legal), that could see your content be algorithmically down-ranked or hidden from teen audiences.

Tip: Audit your content (and ads) and if your audience skews young then make sure you are fully compliant with these stricter "brand safety" rules for teens.

Play 47. Be divergent across platforms

Stop the cross-posting. The platforms are no longer competitors; they are different universes with different rules.

- Meta (FB/IG): Is all about authenticity and Reels. The feed is now secondary.
- TikTok: Is an entertainment and commerce engine.
- X (Twitter): Is a high-risk gamble. 26% of marketers are pulling spend there (GWI). If you're still on the platform, use it for real-time, niche moments, but perhaps not as a core pillar.
- YouTube: This is your "Hub" (Play 43). It's a long-form search engine and great trust builder.

Tip: You need to develop a platform-specific strategy where you make for TikTok (raw, fast, "hook") that is different from the content that you make for YouTube (in-depth, high-value, "hub").

Section 7.4

Email/ CRM: Becoming truly 1:1

New rules from Google and Yahoo block lazy emails, and Apple's privacy updates have made "open rates" useless. It's getting tough to even reach an inbox. So, where do we go from here?

1. **Stop** "batch and blast."
2. **Stop** spying. We can't (and shouldn't) be tracking opens.
3. **Start** listening. Your customer list (CRM) is now your most important tool for understanding what people actually care about. The only way forward is to earn your customers' trust and send them emails so personal, it feels like you wrote it just for them.

Tier 1

Play 48. Pass the DMARC test

Google and Yahoo will block or junk your emails if you fail this test. All bulk senders must have SPF, DKIM, and DMARC authentication set up.

- Action: This is not a "marketing" task. Book a meeting with your IT/tech team. Ask them: "Are we DMARC compliant?" If the answer is "no" or "what's DMARC?", this is now your priority.

Tip: These rules filter out spam, which means for compliant senders, delivery rates are at 99.2% and click rates are rising (2.3%, DMA). Get this right, and you are rewarded with a cleaner, more engaged inbox.

Play 49. Stop measuring Open Rates. Start measuring Clicks.

Apple's Mail Privacy Protection (MPP) makes open rates completely unreliable. It pre-loads all images and registers a fake "open" for everyone.

- The old KPI: Open Rate.
- The new KPI: Click-Through Rate (CTR).
- Action: Create content that encourages a conscious action (a click), not a passive, fake open. Your email copy, design, and CTAs should be optimised for this singular goal.

KPI to watch: Unique Click-Through Rate (CTR). The DMA benchmark is 2.3% (DMA). This is your new baseline for success.

Play 50. Automate your core "money-makers"

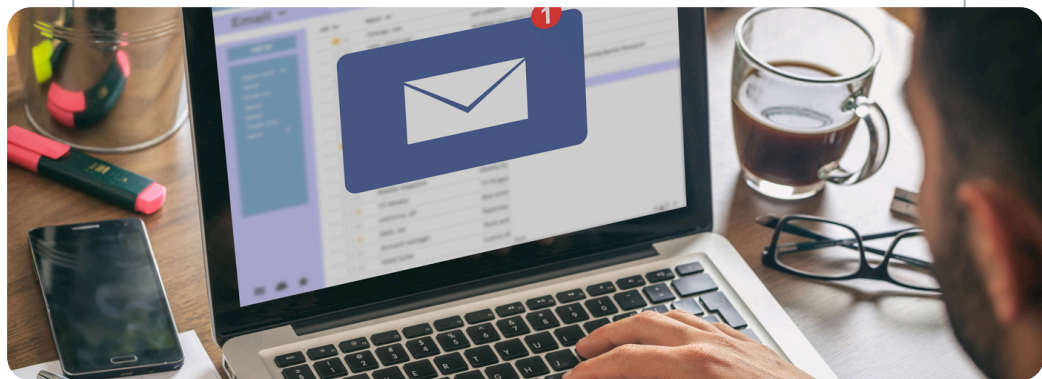
Stop focusing on the one-off "newsletters." The most valuable emails you can send are the ones you build once and that can run forever. That being said, make sure to check and refresh them regularly, though.

- Data: Automated emails have much higher conversion rates than standard campaigns (Omnisend).

Three "must-have" flows:

- Welcome series: (Converts at 2.7%, Litmus) Onboard new subscribers, tell your brand story, and make the first sale.
- Cart abandonment: (Recovers 2.6% of carts, Litmus). This is your primary revenue driver.
- Browse abandonment: "We saw you looking..." This is more personal and highly effective.

Tip: These three flows are responsible for 87% of all sales from automation (Litmus). Before you write a single newsletter, make sure these are in place first.



Play 51. 10x your content efficiency with AI

Your team can spend weeks on a single email campaign (DMA). With AI (Play 18) you can now cut that time by 80%.

Workflow:

- AI: "Write 10 subject lines for a flash sale. Make five serious and five funny."
- AI: "Proofread this email and make the tone more urgent."
- AI: "Take this product description and turn it into three concise, benefit-led bullet points."

Tip: This is the "Human + Machine" engine. The human sets the strategy (the offer, the segment, the goal). The AI handles the grunt work (writing, iterating, proofing).

Play 52. Prepare for Google's Jan 2026 Inbox shake-up

This is a technical, forward-looking play. In Jan 2026, Google is ending support for "Gmailify" and "POP" support. This will break the inbox for a small (but real segment) of your users who feed other email accounts into their main Gmail.

- Action: In Q4 2025, send a helpful, non-salesy message to your list: "Heads Up: A Google change might affect how you get emails. Here's a one-minute guide to make sure you're ready."

Tip: This is a trust-building play that positions you as the helpful expert, not a salesperson, which in turn builds long-term loyalty.



Play 53. A/B test everything (but not Open Rates)

Without testing, how do you really know how effective something really is?

- Stop testing: Open Rates (this is essentially fake data).
- Start testing (for Clicks & Conversions):
- Subject line examples: Test clicks, not opens. (e.g., "20% Off Inside" vs. "A Gift For You").
 - CTA: (e.g., "Shop Now" vs. "Discover the Collection").
 - Offer: (e.g., "20% Off" vs. "Free Shipping").
 - Creative: (e.g., UGC photo vs. Studio photo).

Tip: Always test just one thing at a time and have a clear hypothesis. "We believe a 'Free Shipping' offer will get more conversions than '20% Off' for our AOV > £50 segment."

Tier 2

Play 54. Make your CRM the "single source of truth"

Your CRM must be the "central nervous system" (Play 11) for your entire business. 91% of companies with over 10 employees now use one (HubSpot).

Goal: A true 360° customer view.

Data: Your CRM must integrate data from:

- E-commerce: (Purchase history)
- Website: (Browse abandonment)
- Social: (Interactions, DMs)
- Customer Service: (Support tickets, complaints)

Tip: This is how you get really smart. Example: A customer's support ticket (a complaint) automatically pauses them from receiving your "happy" marketing emails for the next seven days. This is what a cohesive and empathetic system looks like.

Play 55. Master the "composable CRM" stack

The promise of the "all-in-one" CRM suite has become a dated philosophy. Where we're headed, it's all about creating a "composable" (Play 11) – a flexible, "best-in-class" – stack.

The Model:

- Core CRM: This remains your business's "brain" (e.g., HubSpot, Salesforce).
- Specialist tools: Plug in "best-in-class" tools for specific jobs.
 - An advanced ESP (e.g., Klaviyo) for e-commerce.
 - An advanced Analytics tool (e.g., Mixpanel).
 - A "dunning" tool for failed payments (Play 102).

Scalability note: For growing businesses, it's about being smart with your investments in tech. It's better to pay for a 'best-in-class' email tool (that's realistically affordable) that integrates well with the rest of your "stack" (see Play 11), rather than to be stuck with a "jack-of-all-trades" platform that doesn't actually do anything particularly well.

Tip: Diversifying your tech stack provides you with the ultimate flexibility. So, if a better email tool comes along, you just "unplug" the old one and "plug in" the new one, without destroying your entire customer data platform.

Tier 3

Play 56. Make your emails interactive micro-experiences

Why force a click to a landing page when you can simply let the user take action inside the email itself? This is a true friction-reducer, and B2C brands are twice as likely to use this as B2B (Litmus). It's a key 2026 differentiator for capturing impulse buys.

- Tech: Using CSS-based interactivity.
- Use cases:
 - In-email polls and quizzes (Play 3).
 - Interactive product carousels.
 - Add-to-cart (or even full checkout) inside the email.

Play 57. Comply with the DUAA complaints process (June 2026)

This is a new, non-negotiable legal deadline from the Data (Use and Access) Act (UK Government). By June 2026, all UK businesses must have a formal, transparent process for handling data protection complaints from individuals.

- Action: You must have a clear, accessible system to:
- Receive complaints.
- Acknowledge them (within 30 days).
- Investigate and respond to them.

Tip: This is a joint Legal/Marketing/Service task. Use it as another trust-builder and make your "Data Complaints" process easy to find and empathetic.

Play 58. Prepare for Apple's link tracking protection

Apple's iOS 26 / Safari 26 is expected to automatically strip UTM parameters from links (Apple Developer News). Basically, this will break your last-click attribution for email. All your email traffic in Google Analytics will start looking like "Direct" traffic.

- Solution: You must move beyond last-click attribution.
- Server-Side Tracking: See Play 62.
- Media Mix Modelling (MMM): See Play 65.

Tip: This is the "final nail in the coffin" for old-school attribution, and your CFO needs to be aware of and understand it. Your new measurement must be based on holistic, first-party data models.

Play 59. Make accessibility a brand differentiator

Accessibility shouldn't just be seen as a legal checkbox when it's a really powerful way of showing you care.

- Action: Design your emails to be usable by everyone.
- High-contrast: Ensure text is readable (no light grey text on a white background).
- Alt-text: Add descriptive alt-text to all images to assist screen readers.
- Dark mode: Check your email loads perfectly in dark mode.

Tip: Add a line in your email footer: "Designed for all. View our Accessibility Statement." This is a powerful trust signal (Play 12) in the age of automation.

Play 60. Build for voice-activated CRM

This is where the future of data entry is headed. The biggest problem with CRMs has always been getting your team to use them. Voice solves this.

- Vision: Your team no longer "types" reports. They just talk to the CRM.
- Use case: A sales rep leaves a meeting and says: "Hey CRM, log a meeting with Jane. We discussed the new line. She's interested in a demo. Create a deal for £20k and set me a follow-up task for Wednesday."

Tip: When you re-evaluate your CRM contract, "Voice-activated NLP" should be a key feature you ask about.

Play 61. Implement proactive IoT / behavioural service

Use your CRM to solve problems before the customer knows they have one.

- Model: This is for "connected" products (e.g., smart appliances, cars, electronics).
- Workflow:
 - A "smart" washing machine's sensor detects that a part is failing.
 - It immediately sends an error code to your CRM.
 - The CRM will then create a support ticket, checks the product's warranty, and then email the customer: "We've detected a potential issue with your filter. Here's a two-minute video on how to fix it. Alternatively, click here to schedule a free service call."

Tip: This turns your CRM from a reactive service tool into a proactive success engine, building unbelievable customer loyalty.

Hear from the experts...



With you using your CRM as your single source of truth, you will be able to gather all the information to ensure your email communication is personalised and relevant.

Consumers want to feel heard and seen more; this is why personalisation is key when sending emails to your customers.

Ensuring you stay relevant and send relevant content means customers will open and engage with your emails. With you not looking at the open rates anymore, ensuring your emails are being clicked is super important.

This will also help with your domain authority.

Claire Zulu
Head of CRM



Section 7.5

Analytics: Privacy-first intelligence

Covert tracking has become a no-go and the UK Data Use and Access Act (DUAA) has rewritten the rules. But see this as an opportunity. The DUAA's new rules give UK businesses a competitive advantage, allowing us to build rich, first-party datasets needed to power predictive AI in GA4. As a result, your focus should move from merely "reporting" to "modeling," "predicting," and proving incrementality.



Tier 1

Play 62. Implement server-side tagging

Traditional in-browser ("client-side") tagging has become reliable, as it's challenged by ad-blockers, iOS 14+, and privacy-first browsers. As a result you're experiencing 30%+ data loss.

The solution? Move your tagging to a secure server environment where you regain control of that data (e.g., Google Tag Gateway).

Benefits:

- Data accuracy: Recover lost conversions. Brands see an average 14% uplift in tracked conversions (Search Engine Land).
- Speed: Your website gets faster (fewer scripts in the browser).

Tip: This is the technical requirement for a privacy-first world. It's how you build a reliable, first-party data pipeline. It's also not a simple implementation – so feel free to reach out if you need support doing this.

Play 63. Leverage the DUAA "Analytics Exemption"

The DUAA (June 2025) removed the need for explicit opt-in consent for low-risk, first-party analytics cookies (like GA4) (UK Government).

- The old way (EU): "Accept Cookies" -> 90% of users click "No" -> Data is sparse and biased.
- The new way (UK): No "Accept" needed. You can collect analytics data by default, as long as you provide clear information and a visible opt-out.

Tip: Update your cookie banner now. You will instantly move from 10% data collection to 90%+, giving your AI models the fuel they need to work.



Play 64. Implement enhanced conversions

This is the other half of your new data pipeline and it's how you can attribute sales without reliable cookies.

- How it works: When a user buys, you securely send a "hashed" (anonymised) piece of first-party data (like their email) to Google. Google matches this to an ad click even if the cookie was lost.
- Result: You can now prove your PPC/Paid Social is working. Advertisers see an 8% incremental ROAS uplift on search (Search Engine Land).

Tip: Implement this with server-side tagging (Play 62) and together they're the new baseline requirement for getting the right data.

Tier 2

Play 65. Shift from Attribution to Incrementality

Stop asking "Which channel gets 100% of the credit?" (Attribution) and instead think and track "Did this channel add any value at all?" (Incrementality).

- Question from your CFO: "Would we have gotten that sale anyway?"
- Solution: Run Incrementality tests (also called "Lift Studies").
- Test: Show your ads to Group A. Show no ads (a "ghost ad") to a similar Group B. The difference in sales between A and B is your "incremental lift."

Scalability note: Enterprise brands use expensive "Media Mix Modeling" (MMM) for this. A simple, low-budget version is to run a 'geo-based' test. Run your ads in one region (e.g., Manchester) but not another (e.g., Leeds) and measure the 'lift' in sales or direct traffic in the 'on' region vs. the 'off' region.

Play 66. Let GA4's "Generated Insights" be your personal analyst

Your team doesn't have time to dig for insights. So let GA4's AI do it for you. GA4's "Generated Insights" analyses significant trends and anomalies within your data and explains them to you in simple English, not more jargon.

- Use case: Log in and GA4 will tell you something like: "You saw a 40% spike in traffic from Reddit.com, leading to 15 new users" or "Conversion rate for users on Android devices dropped 25% yesterday."

Tip: Combine this with the use of Annotations (another new feature in GA4) to add your own context to AI's findings. Example: The AI flags a traffic spike. Next to this you then add an annotation: "This was the day our PR campaign (Play 33) went live."

Tier 3

Play 67. Answer engine optimisation (AEO) Analytics

Gartner predicts a 25% drop in search traffic by 2026 as AI Overviews (Play 25) answer user questions directly (Gartner).

- Problem: Your "analytics" will be showing a terrifying drop in organic traffic.
- New strategy (AEO): Your goal is no longer just traffic; it's influence. You must become the trusted source the AI cites.
- New KPIs:
 - "Brand as Source" Citations: How often does the AI mention your brand in its answers?
 - Branded Search Uplift: Are more people searching directly? (Play 28)

Tip: This is a C-suite conversation, but it's good to re-set expectations now. Explain that "Organic Traffic" will go down, but "Brand Influence" (and direct traffic) will go up.

Hear from the experts...



Businesses are facing more changes to legislation around data collection, but this time it will ease the burden on compliance and also allow for more data to be collected that is aggregated, such as visitor stats etc.

It's a good middle ground for enabling businesses to use low-risk data to innovate and improve website performance whilst still respecting user privacy. The EU is also prepping similar legislation, although they have specified that browsers will lawfully need to provide a choice to users for what cookies can be placed and data shared, and this will form the basis to remove the need for endless cookie banners.

Ultimately, in the next 12 months, with a server-side set-up, businesses will have access to more data than in the last few years because of GDPR and consent mode rules.

Sam Thomas
Insights Director



Section 7.6

PPC: AI-driven revenue

Google's Performance Max (PMax) and Meta's Advantage+ have become a default within paid media. Infact, in the UK, PMax adoption is the highest in the world (84%, Search Engine Land). The job is no longer to be a "PPC Manager"; but an "AI Orchestrator." The new levers you're working with are not "bids" and "keywords", but Data, Creative, and Business Objectives.

Tier 1

Play 68. Make first-party data your number one input

Your AI campaign will only be as good as the data that you feed it. Remember the phrase "rubbish in, rubbish out" (and that's the polite way to put it). Well, that rings true here.

- Strategy: Use your own data to teach the AI what a good customer looks like.
- Three "must-do" data actions:
 - Enhanced conversions: (See Play 64) This is how you feed the AI sales data.
 - Offline conversion imports: Upload your refund data. This teaches the AI to stop finding customers who look like people that return products.
 - Customer match: Upload your best customer list (Play 1). This is the basis for your most powerful "Lookalike" audiences.

Play 69. Invest in Retail Media Networks (RMNs)

This is called the "third big wave of digital advertising" and can be a core part of your strategic budget (Section 6) – 65% of marketers see them as crucial (McKinsey).

- What are they? Advertising on retailer websites like Amazon and Tesco.
- Why? You are placing your ad at the exact digital point of purchase, on a site the user already trusts.
- Action: Allocate a test budget (from your "Experiment" bucket) to run "Sponsored Product" ads on Amazon for your most important products.

Tip: This is a "Commerce Media" function (Play 10).

The ROAS can be phenomenal, as you are only paying to reach users who are actively shopping in your category.

Scalability note: This isn't just for eComm giants. The world's largest and most accessible RMN is Amazon Advertising. If you sell products on Amazon, you are an RMN advertiser. The second is eBay Promoted Listings. This can be your starting point.

Tier 2

Play 70. "Asset-Based" PMax/Advantage+ campaigns

This is the tactical execution of Play 21, where building granular ad groups is replaced with the creation of "asset libraries."

- New Workflow:
 - Give the platform a range of creative assets to work with: 10-15 Headlines, 5+ Descriptions, 10+ High-quality images, 5+ Videos (especially vertical video for Reels/Shorts).
 - Give it signals: Add your best audiences (e.g., your Customer Match list (Play 68), your "Likely Purchasers" list (Play 6)).
 - Give it a goal: Set the goal (e.g., "Maximise Conversion Value") and let the AI run. (Support tickets, complaints)

Tip: With your new role as "Creative Strategist", the AI handles the bidding while you refresh the creative. You must feed the AI new assets weekly/monthly to prevent ad fatigue.



Play 71. Build "audience layers"

Previously, you'd be bidding on 1,000 long-tail keywords, now the new strategy is to trust Broad Match and control it with audience signals.

- The new targeting model:
 - Keywords: Use Broad Match to capture all relevant queries (even ones you haven't thought of).
 - Audience layers: Guide the AI by "layering" high-intent audiences over the Broad Match (e.g., your "Past Purchasers" list or Google's "In-Market" segments).

Tip: You're not buying keywords, you're buying users who happen to be searching. You trust the AI to find the right user by giving it the best possible data.

Play 72. Master the hybrid "PMax + Standard" structure

The power of AI is great, but don't go 100% in on PMax. It is a "black box," and you still need some control. So, a hybrid structure is the best practice for 2026.

- PMax campaigns: Use this for prospecting and scaling conversions. This becomes your "growth engine."
- Standard search campaigns: Use these for control and defence.
- Brand defence: Run a manual campaign targeting only your brand name (in competitive markets). This ensures you 100% own your brand search.
- High-intent "money" keywords: For your 10–20 most profitable keywords, run a Standard campaign to maintain full control over ad copy and bidding.

Tip: Use negative keywords in PMax to "force" your brand traffic into your Standard Brand campaign, where it's cheaper and you can control the message.

Tier 3

Play 73. Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) paid strategy

This is the paid search version of Play 28 and Play 68. As AI Overviews answer questions, up to 60% of clicks may disappear (Search Engine Land).

- Problem: Your "informational" keywords will stop getting traffic.
- Pivot: Re-allocate budget from "Top-of-Funnel" (TOFU) informational keywords to "Bottom-of-Funnel" (BOFU) transactional keywords.
- New budget focus:
 - High-Intent: "Buy [product name] online"
 - Competitor: "[competitor name] alternative"
 - Local: "[product] near me"

Tip: The traffic that is left will be much more expensive and much higher-intent. Your CVR must be perfect. This makes your e-commerce CRO plays (Play 96) even more important.

Play 74 Don't sleep on Microsoft (Bing)

It's UK market share is small but valuable, and its AI strategy is different – Microsoft is integrating ads directly into its Copilot AI chat.

New formats:

- Showroom Ads: AI-generated shopping experiences inside the chat when a user shows intent.
- Brand Agents: AI "sales assistants" that users can talk to in the chat.

Tip: This is a Tier 3 experiment. Test 5–10% of your search budget to Microsoft Ads to start testing these new "conversational commerce" formats.

Play 75. All-channel, all-format (PMax + Social)

Stop thinking of "Search" and "Social" as separate things. PMax and Advantage+ are both all-channel, all-format AI engines.

The funnel:

- Paid Social (Top): Use Meta Advantage+ (Play 81) for prospecting. Find new users who don't know you exist.
- PPC (Bottom): Use PMax (Play 70) to capture that new demand when those users go to Google and search for your brand.

Tip: Your measurement (Play 65) must be holistic. You need to see how your Social awareness lift leads to cheaper Search conversions.



Hear from the experts...



The brands winning in paid media today are the ones that recognise that AI isn't an add-on, it's now the core of PPC. With Performance Max and Advantage+, a marketer's role has shifted from managing bids to analysing & orchestrating data.

First-party data is now essential to gaining a real competitive advantage. When platforms are given reliable purchase data & detailed customer lists, the algorithms learn much quicker, resulting in smarter optimisation & accelerated learning.

Another key factor to success in the modern landscape is workflows: The most effective brands have now built their workflows around assets, audiences and objectives rather than just keywords. They successfully balance the scale of PMAX alongside the control of standard search.

Finally, as AI overviews dramatically reduce informational search traffic for paid, it's vital that your budgets are shifting more so towards higher intent, bottom of funnel queries in order to reduce wasted spend in areas which are dominated by AI.

George Noon
Head of PPC



Section 7.7

Paid Social: The new rules of trust and commerce

UK social ad spend surged to £9.02 billion in 2025, a 13.8% increase (Statista). But this record investment is colliding with only 39% of consumers trusting ads (Salesforce) and a fragmented audience. The old "interrupt" model of social is no longer viable. Instead, now you need to master three new realities: AI-driven automation, full-funnel social commerce, and provable, authentic trust.

**£9
billion**

The size of the UK
social ad market

Tier 1

Play 76. Prepare for the HFSS Ad ban

This is the most significant regulatory change for 2026. The ban on paid online ads for food and drink High in Fat, Salt, or Sugar (HFSS) comes into full legal force on 5th January 2026 (UK Government).

- **Mandate:** All paid online ads for in-scope products are banned, 24/7.
- **"Brand" exemption:** A narrow exemption is expected for "pure brand advertising" (ads that don't show the HFSS product). This is your only path forward.

Tip: Move all creative to be "brand-first," focusing on your company's values and identity, not the specific product.

Play 77. Comply with DMCCA: Subscriptions

The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers (DMCCA) Act is now in force, bringing fines of up to 10% of global turnover.

- **Subscription traps (Spring 2026):** All subscription models (e.g., "Subscribe & Save") advertised on social must have clear pre-contract information and a simple (single-step) cancellation process.

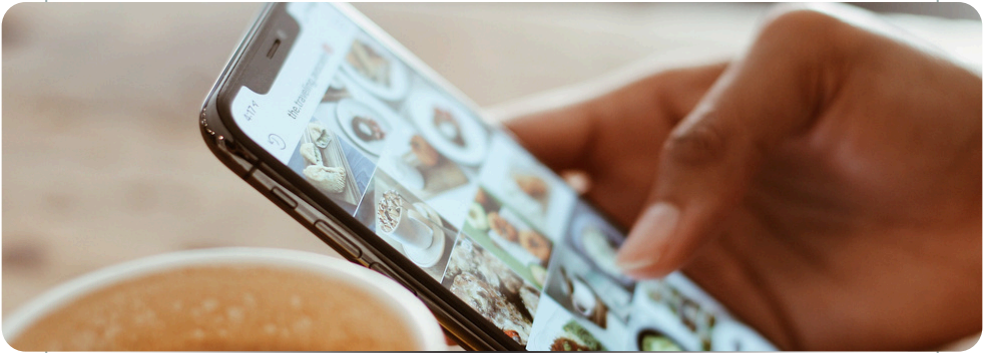
Tip: Compliance can be a conversion tool in itself. Use ad copy like, "Cancel anytime, no-questions-asked" (Play 100) to build trust and overcome a key purchase barrier.

Play 78. Master Meta's "Consent or Pay"

Meta's UK ecosystem now gives users an explicit choice: pay for an ad-free experience or consent to personalised ads.

- Impact: Your targetable audience is now smaller, but more explicitly opted-in and (in theory) higher-intent.
- Algorithm: Meta's algorithm now aggressively prioritises authenticity and Reels. Reels are a "necessity," not an option (Meta).

Tip: Your paid social strategy is a video strategy. Earmark 70%+ of your Meta creative budget for Reels. A static image ad will struggle to get any meaningful delivery.



Play 79. Go all-In on TikTok Shop

TikTok is becoming a commerce giant. In the UK, sales have grown over 300% and 71% of users stated they'd bought something they had seen on the platform (TikTok). It's sparked a whole new way for consumers to spend, and the momentum it's built shows no sign of stopping..

- TikTok has collapsed the funnel: The one-click buying functionality of TikTok Shop can increase sales conversions by 40% (compared to redirecting traffic to an external site (TikTok)).
- Action: Instead of running ads on TikTok, run ads for TikTok Shop. Use the platform's commerce tools to create a frictionless, in-app path to purchase for your customers.

Tip: Use your paid spend to amplify your best-performing organic videos. This looks native, builds trust, and drives sales.

Tier 2

Play 80. Divide your audience by generation

A "one-size-fits-all" platform strategy is a waste of your money. Your audience lives in different digital worlds (GWI).

- Gen Z (91% on Insta, 86% on TikTok): Creative must be video-first, authentic, and creator-led.
- Gen X (92% on FB) & Boomers (91% on FB): Facebook is your primary channel for these groups. Use a mix of video and high-quality static images with clear copy.

Tip: Build separate ad sets and different creative for each generational group. A TikTok ad repurposed for a Boomer audience on Facebook will fail (and vice-versa).

Play 81. Meta Advantage+ ("AI co-pilot")

This is the tactical execution of Play 71. The Advantage+ Sales Campaign (ASC) is Meta's "most efficient solution" for e-commerce (Meta).

- Promise: ASCs deliver a 26% lower CPA and 20% higher ROAS on average (Meta).
- Trade-off: You give up manual control (targeting, placements) and, in exchange, you must feed the AI:
 - Creative: A constant stream of new video and image assets (Play 21).
- Data: Your best first-party data (e.g., "Past Purchasers" list) (Play 68).

Tip: Your single biggest performance lever is creative. You must refresh your creative assets weekly or bi-weekly.

Play 82. "Deinfluencing-proof" content

We are in a trust deficit where only 39% of consumers trust ads (Salesforce), and where "deinfluencing" mentions have surged 79% this year (eMarketer).

- Problem: Polished, corporate ads are met with extreme skepticism.
- Solution: Use your paid budget to amplify authentic, trustworthy content.
- User-generated content (UGC): Play 13.
- Creator-led content: Play 15.

Tip: Your goal is to create paid content that mirrors the high-performing, authentic organic content that users see and love (engage with) in their feed. Your ads should never look like ads.

Tier 3

Play 83. Win at "Social SEO"

Social platforms are the new search engines. Gen Z uses TikTok as a search tool (GWI) and TikTok is now even rolling out keyword search term targeting – so your ads must be optimised for search intent.

- How to win:
 - Spoken keywords: Your video script must include the keywords people are searching for (e.g., "This is the best waterproof mascara for UK weather").
 - On-screen text: Your on-screen text overlays should reinforce those keywords.

Tip: Your paid social team and your SEO team (Play 25) need to be in the same room. Your SEO keyword research is now a primary input for your paid social creative.

Play 84. Test high-growth, high-trust platforms (Reddit)

X (Twitter) is high-risk, with 26% of marketers pulling spend (GWI). Your Tier 3 budget should be used to find its replacement.

- Opportunity: Reddit.
- Data: With 46% year-over-year growth in daily active users (GWI), Reddit is a massive, untapped opportunity.
- Strategy: Reddit users hate being marketed to. Your ads must feel like they belong. Promote high-value, useful content or target your ads only to niche subreddits (e.g., /r/SkincareAddictionUK) with an offer that matches their intelligence.

Tip: Reddit's audience is highly-educated, skeptical, and displays high-intent. If you can win their trust, then you'll have a customer for life.

Play 85. Pilot practical immersive Ads (AR)

Augmented Reality (AR) "Try-Ons" are a practical, high-value tool that is working on Meta, Pinterest, and Snapchat.

- Value: This is not a gimmick. It's a high-impact utility that bridges the gap between online discovery and purchase confidence.

Scalability note: While custom AR builds are expensive, platforms like Meta, Pinterest, and Snapchat are increasingly offering built-in AR 'Try-On' ad formats that are more accessible.

Hear from the experts...



In terms of social marketing, it is becoming clear there is a need, more than ever, to utilise organic and paid social together. This ensures that your full end-to-end strategy is cohesive and aligned from a social element as opposed to completely separate for paid and organic.

Utilise content that is performing well organically to natively push and utilise within your paid strategy. This builds on the work you are already doing.

Doing this, you create a user journey for the customer that feels organic and native for the desired channel, whilst utilising the tools of paid social in terms of targeting, etc., to then drive your desired conversion. For channels such as TikTok and Pinterest, this is key. We know that the users of these channels have different habits in terms of shopping and are more in-tune with overt advertising, so this has to feel more authentic to the organic social material.

Tailor your organic efforts and intel on user behaviours on each channel to help drive your decision-making for each channel in terms of assets to be used.

Vicky Mepstead
Senior Paid Social Manager



Section 7.8

Affiliate marketing: The performance powerhouse

Affiliate marketing has matured far beyond its "last-click voucher code" reputation. Despite a tough economy, it has proven its resilience, growing 9% year-over-year to a £1.7 billion channel (AWIN). With an average ROI of 12:1, it's a proven, scalable revenue driver (Rakuten).

9%

growth of affiliate marketing YoY in the UK



Tier 1

Play 86. Fix your tracking (server-to-server)

You cannot trust your data or pay partners fairly without a modern stack. Third-party cookies have become unreliable, and so to has browser-level tracking.

- Solution: Implement Server-to-Server (S2S) tracking to create a direct and reliable link between your server and the affiliate network's server; aswell as bypassing browser-level privacy blocks.

KPI to watch: Conversion Data Accuracy. S2S tracking ensures you are not "losing" sales data, leading to more accurate attribution.

Play 87. AI-powered fraud detection

Affiliate fraud (such as click fraud and ad stacking) has become a multi-billion-pound problem that infects your data and even worse, wastes your budget.

- Action: Use AI-powered fraud detection tools, which are built into your affiliate network (e.g., Awin, Rakuten, Impact) to analyse traffic patterns in real-time and flag/block any suspicious activity.

Tip: This is not just a matter of saving money, but also ensuring your data remains clean. Your other AI models (like personalisation) will become useless if they're being trained on fraudulent data.

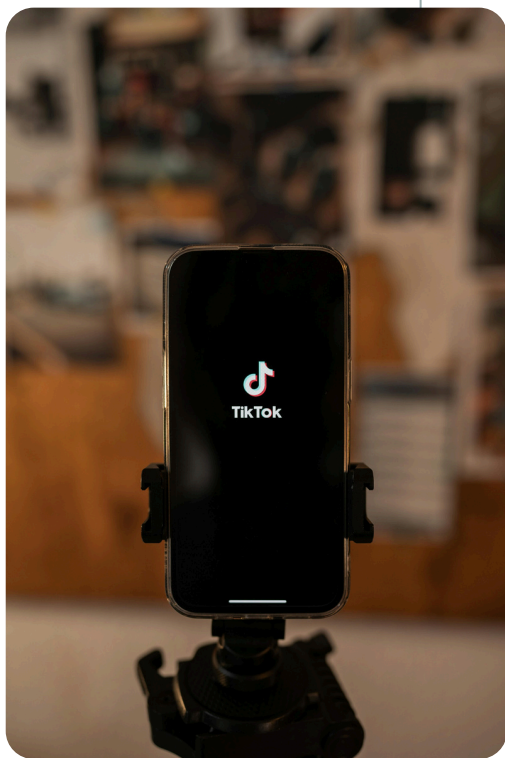
Tier 2

Play 88. The "shoppertainment" model

The affiliate landscape has moved from static blogs to dynamic, video-first social commerce. The customer journey now starts with inspiration, not just search.

- New channels: Recruit partners on TikTok Shop (Play 79), YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels. These platforms have integrated checkouts, capturing users at the moment of discovery.
- Old channels: Don't abandon traditional partners. Cashback & Loyalty still account for 29% of affiliate spend and are crucial for closing bottom-of-funnel, high-intent sales (AWIN).

Tip: Your 2026 partner strategy must be full-funnel. Use creators for top-of-funnel inspiration and cashback/loyalty partners to convert that demand.



Play 89. Fuse creators with performance (The Hybrid Model)

Stop paying flat fees for "influencer posts." The 2026 model is "creator-driven commerce," and it lives in the affiliate channel.

- Problem: High-quality creators often refuse pure CPA deals, but flat fees are risky for you.
- Hybrid solution: Offer a hybrid structure. Pay a modest fixed fee (to cover their content creation time) plus a higher CPA/commission on sales. This aligns their incentive to sell with your need for authentic content quality.
- ROI: Businesses are earning an average of £5.78 for every £1 spent on this specific creator model (Influencer Marketing Hub), while the broader affiliate channel averages 12:1 (Rakuten). Both are exceptionally profitable.

Play 90. AI for hyper-personalisation

Use AI-powered affiliate links that dynamically adjust offers in real-time, based on a user's history.

- Result: A new visitor might see "10% Off Your First Order," whereas a loyal customer sees "Free Shipping, Welcome Back."

40%

of affiliate marketers plan to use AI for personalised content by 2026 (AWIN)

Scalability note: The scalable, 'Tier 1' version is to simply create different links for different partners. Give your 'loyalty' partners one offer and your 'content' partners another.

Play 91. Use AI for partner discovery and recruitment

The best partners are often "hidden gems" you haven't found yet. Using AI-powered partner discovery tools (available on most major networks) you can search for emerging creators and content sites that match your specific niche.

- Value: AI analyses a potential partner's content for brand safety, audience demographics, and engagement (not just follower counts) to find the most suitable (authentic and high-value) partners for you.



Tier 3

Play 92. AI-powered multi-touch attribution

Stop paying on "last-click." It's a flawed model that trains your partners to be "voucher-code snipers."

- Solution: Use an AI-powered multi-touch attribution model. This can analyse the entire customer journey and assign fair credit to the creator who introduced the customer, the blog that reviewed the product, and the cashback site that closed the sale.

Tip: By rewarding your "introducer" partners fairly, you incentivise them to keep sending you new, high-value customers.

Play 93. Launch a brand-to-brand partnership program

Use the technology of your affiliate network to partner with non-competing brands. This will unlock a whole new, high-trust acquisition channel.

- Example: You sell high-end kitchen appliances and you partner with a premium grocery delivery service. After a customer buys a smart fridge, your partner sends them a "Stock your new fridge" offer, and between you, you share the revenue.

Tip: This is a core "Retail Media" (Play 70) strategy. Start by mapping your customer's journey before and after they buy your product.

Play 94. Pilot automated payouts and trust contracts

As demand for instant gratification rises, so too does the need for immediate payment and total trust between partners. This is the ultimate tool to create partner loyalty and to protect yourself from fraudulent activity.

- Automated commission payments: Explore "smart contract" technology that automates commission payouts instantly when a sale is verified. This will eliminate tracking delays, cut down on fraud (Play 87), and provide a guarantee to your partners that they will be paid immediately – creating a side benefit that gives you a competitive edge in recruiting top talent.
- Trust contracts: These systems provide complete transparency, allowing both you and your partner to view every click and conversion. In return, for this openness it helps minimise any disputes and should improve the overall quality of your partnership.

Hear from the experts...



When launching or expanding an affiliate programme, the real foundations are simple: work with the right partners across the full funnel and make sure your tracking is genuinely accurate. Affiliates are often boxed in as a lower-funnel, discount-driven channel, and while that space still matters for customer value and loyalty, it's the balance of partners across the entire consumer journey that unlocks true scale and incremental growth.

AI has introduced a spike in bot traffic and click-farming, which can drag down conversion rates and higher fraudulent activity, but certain software also gives us stronger insight into performance. It helps highlight who's driving quality traffic and where your time and budget should go, without the heavy lifting that used to come with it. AI is absolutely the future, but it can't replace the core of a strong affiliate programme, trust, collaboration and meaningful relationships.

Those human elements are still the biggest advantage when building a programme that grows sustainably and performs at every stage.

Jess Gears
Senior Affiliate Executive



Section 7.9:

The E-commerce & DTC Playbook: CRO and Checkout

This playbook is for brands where the website is the business. For Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) brands, success isn't just about traffic, it's about conversion. Every one-second delay costs you around a 7% drop in conversion, and 88% of users will never return after a bad experience (UX) (Google).



Tier 1

Play 95. Win on speed and mobile-first

A slow, clunky site could be costing you a fortune. This play is therefore a foundation of all CRO for your site.

- Speed: 53% of mobile users will abandon your site if it takes longer than three seconds to load (Google).
- Mobile: 55% of all UK e-commerce transactions happen on a smartphone (eMarketer).

KPI to watch: Mobile Conversion Rate vs. Desktop Conversion Rate. If your mobile CVR is 50% lower than desktop, your mobile experience is broken.

Play 96. Remove all checkout friction

The goal is to get from "Add to Cart" to "Purchase Confirmed" in the fewest and simplest steps possible.

- Guest Checkout: Forcing a user to "Create an Account" before they can pay is a conversion killer.
- Express checkouts: Integrate Apple Pay, Google Pay, PayPal, and ShopPay. For many users, this is the expected way to pay.
- Simplify forms: Only ask for what is necessary. Use address auto-complete tools to minimise typing.

Tier 2

Play 97. Personalise your homepage (the "Two Britains")

Use the first- and zero-party data you have (Play 1) to personalise your most valuable asset: the homepage.

Strategy: Acknowledge the "Tale of Two Britains" (Play 5).

- "Cautious Majority" segment: This user sees a homepage hero banner for "Shop the Sale" or "Value Bundles." Their product recommendations are sorted by "Price: Low to High."
- "Confident Affluent" segment: This user sees "Shop New Arrivals" or "Our Sustainability Story." Their product recommendations are sorted by "Newest."

KPI to watch: Conversion Rate by Segment. You are aiming to prove that a personalised homepage converts a user at a significantly higher rate than a generic one.

Play 98. AI-driven cross-sells and upsells

Your primary goal is CRO, and your second is AOV (Average Order Value).

- Cross-sell: "Customers who bought this also bought..." Show relevant, complementary items on the product page.
- Upsell: "Complete the look." Show a better or completing item.

Tip: The best place for an upsell is the "Order Confirmed" page. The customer has already trusted you and is in a "buying" state of mind. Use this page to offer a "one-time" 10% discount on their next purchase.

Tier 3

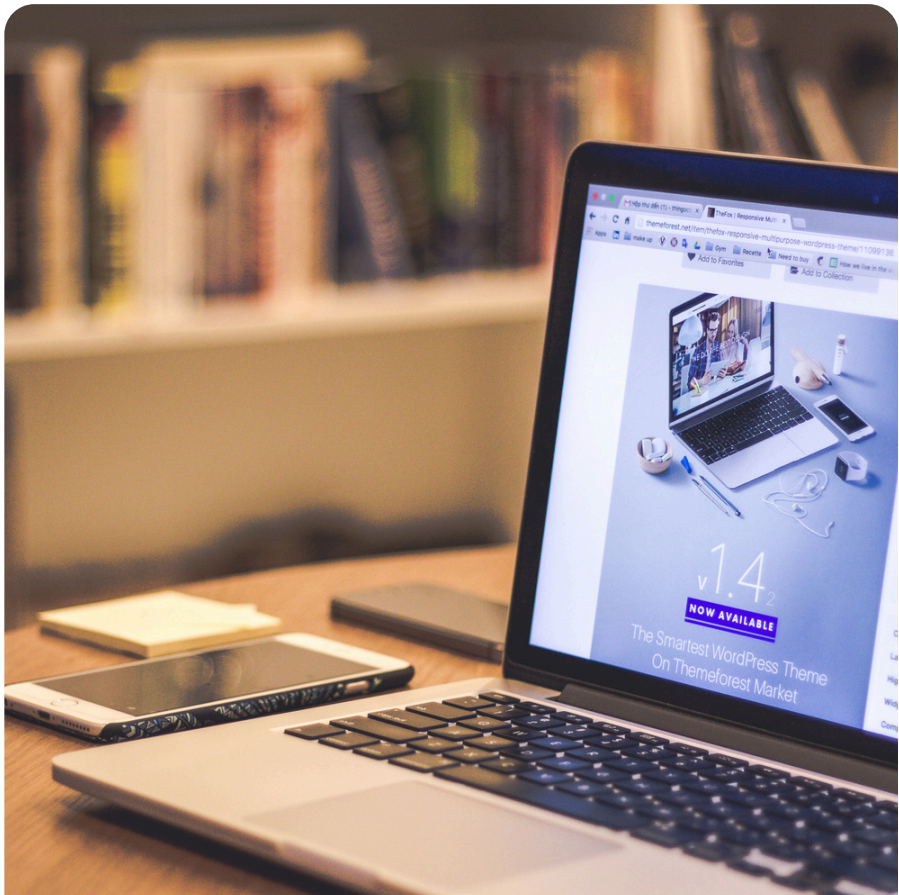
Play 99. Go "headless" for ultimate flexibility

"Headless" commerce decouples your front-end "head" (the user-facing website) from your back-end "body" (your e-commerce engine, CRM, etc.).

Why do it?

- Speed: You can build a lightning-fast, custom front-end (like a Progressive Web App) that isn't bloated by a old, complex operating system.
- Flexibility: You can change back-end tools without having to rebuild your entire website.

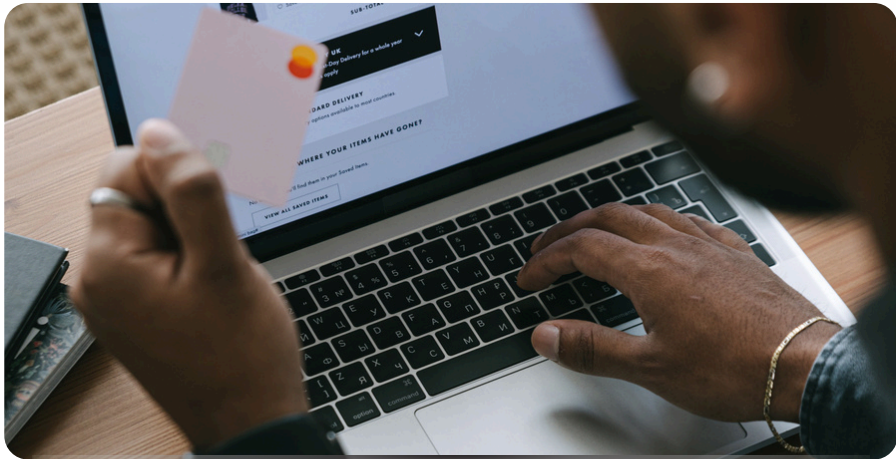
Scalability note: This is a major project for any large, high-volume brand. For the scaling business equivalent, the main principle is achieving speed. You don't need to 'go headless' to achieve a fast site. Focus on optimising your Shopify/BigCommerce site (Play 95) before you even think about this.



Section 7.10:

The Subscription & App Playbook

This playbook is for the businesses where their product is the service they provide (e.g., SaaS, subscription boxes, apps). Here Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC) is the enemy and Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) is the primary objective. Essentially, your entire business lives or dies by one metric: Churn.



Tier 1

Play 100. Comply with DMCCA subscription rules (Spring 2026)

This is the most critical legal threat to the subscription economy. The DMCCA's "subscription trap" rules are designed to kill high-friction cancellation processes.

- 2026 Mandate:
 - Clear pre-contract info
 - Automated renewal reminders
 - A simple, single-step cancellation process

Tip: Make "Cancel anytime, no-questions-asked" a core part of your marketing. The trust you build by removing the fear of the "subscription trap" will increase your sign-ups.

Play 101. Nail the "First seven days" onboarding

Your highest churn rate will always be in the first month. Why? Because users sign up and don't understand the value.

- Action: Your onboarding (in-app messages and email flows) must demonstrate to the user your product's value (the "Aha!" moment) and get them to take the initial actions you need them to complete to get started (and then engaged).

KPI to watch: Week 1 Activation Rate. What percentage of new users completed your three "golden" setup actions within seven days?

Play 102. Fix your involuntary churn

A huge portion of your churn isn't users leaving; it's users failing to pay (expired cards, lost cards).

- Solution: Use a "dunning" management tool (most payment platforms like Stripe or Chargebee have this).
 - Pre-dunning: Automatically email a user before their card expires.
 - Smart retries: Automatically retry a failed payment at strategic intervals.

Tip: This is the lowest-hanging fruit to boost CLV. Fixing this is a one-time setup that provides an immediate, permanent lift to your revenue.

Tier 2

Play 103. Create "stickiness" with gamification and community

Protect your product in a way that your competitors can't copy – through user investment and human connection.

- Gamification: Make your app "sticky." Use tactics like Streaks (Duolingo), Badges, and Leaderboards.
- Community: Build a members-only Discord, Slack, or Facebook Group (Play 17).

Tip: Your community is the product. A user who makes a "friend" in your community is 10x less likely to churn.

Play 104. Personalise your "save" offers

Don't use a one-size-fits-all "cancellation" page. Use it as a final, high-stakes zero-party data collection point to make a personalised save.

- Action: Your "Cancel Subscription" button should lead to a one-question survey: "Why are you leaving?"
 - Reason: "It's too expensive" -> Show: A "Pause for three months" or "Downgrade to a 50% off 'Lite' plan" offer.
 - Reason: "I'm not using it enough" -> Show: A link to book a free 15-min "1:1 setup call" with a product specialist.

Tip: Never make a "Cancel" button a single click. Always use it as a final chance to learn and save the customer.

Tier 3

Play 105. Drive your expansion revenue

This is the ultimate goal for subscription businesses – not just retaining revenue, but actually growing it from your existing customer base.

- Goal: Net Revenue Retention (NRR) more than 100%. This means your existing customers are spending more with you than you are losing through churn.
- Upsell: Moving a user from a "Free" to "Pro" plan.
- Cross-sell: Selling an "add-on" feature (e.g., a new "AI Assistant" for £5/mo).

Tip: Your entire app design should be a "freemium" upsell machine. Show "Pro" features as "locked" and use a simple, non-intrusive tooltip to explain their value.

Insight to Action: Your 2026 Roadmap

This guide has covered a lot of ground. From the nuances of server-side tagging to the macro-economics of the "Two Britains." But knowledge without execution is just noise.

If you remember nothing else, remember these four pillars. These are your marketing foundations for 2026:

1

Trust is the Premium

The DMCCA hasn't just introduced fines, it's created a new market standard. We've been living in a world of sloppy AI and fake reviews, so your compliance with these new laws have now provided an opportunity of competitive advantage. Proving you are real, honest, and legal is how you win "Trust".

2

First-Party Data as the Engine

The cookie isn't dead, but it has become extremely unreliable. The only data you can bank on today is the data that you earn. Your ability to capture, segment, and action this data (Play 1) is the biggest determinant of your AI's success.

3

The Human + Machine

AI is the new operational default. But AI is a commodity. Your competitive advantage instead is your humanity – your strategy, your empathy, and your creative spark that AI cannot replicate.

4

Customer Lifetime Value focus

The war between "brand" and "performance" is over. The only way to win is to unite your teams into "Pods" (Play 9) focused on a single metric: Customer Lifetime Value.

"Where do I even start?"

Your first 90-day plan

First 30 days

Compliance (Play 12):

Schedule your DMCCA audit. This is your number one, non-negotiable priority. Review your pricing, subscription cancellation flows, and review verification processes.

Data (Play 1):

Conduct your data audit. Map every single customer touchpoint where you could be capturing an email or preference, but aren't.

Alignment (Play 7):

Schedule the first "CLV alignment" meeting with your heads of E-commerce, Service, and Finance. Use "CLV" as the single item on the agenda.

Segmentation (Play 2):

Launch your first, simple "Customer" vs. "Prospect" email segmentation. Create two separate welcome/onboarding journeys. This is your first quick win.

30-60 days

AI (Play 18):

Run your first "lunch and learn" on AI productivity. Get your team Pro licenses and create your first shared "Prompt Library." Frame it as "augmenting" their skills.

Fund your experiment (Section 6):

Run the "Divest" audit. Identify one legacy campaign or tool to cut. This budget is now free for your first Tier 2 pilot.

Zero-party data (Play 3):

Use your "Divest" budget to build your first zero-party data pilot (e.g., a "Find Your Style" quiz).

60-90 days

Trust (Play 13):

Launch your first UGC campaign. Start simple: one post-purchase email asking customers to use your hashtag for a chance to be featured.

Structure (Play 9):

Start the "Customer Journey Pod" conversation. Whiteboard what it would look like. Pick your champions for the first pilot pod (e.g., the "Acquisition Pod").

Now that you have a plan, you need a starting point. To help you...

Get your free visibility baseline

Supertools

To help you find your starting point, we're offering a free, no-obligation Online Visibility Report.

Powered by our proprietary tech, Supertools®, this report helps turn complex data cuts through the noise. It will give you a clear, data-driven snapshot of your current performance, benchmark against your key competitors, and uncover the immediate, actionable opportunities you can take advantage of.

This provides the data-driven foundation for your 2026 plan.

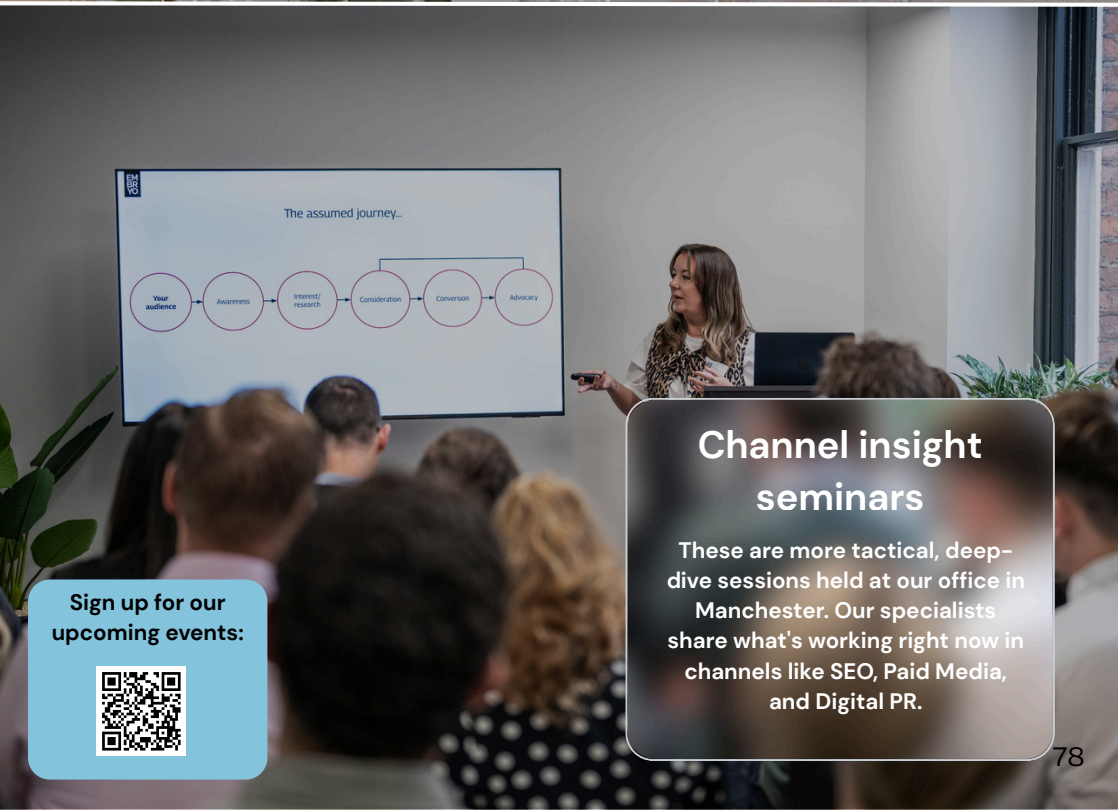
Search Visibility





Marketing roundtable

This is our high-level, strategic series held at The Ivy in various locations around the UK. We bring together marketing leaders for an open discussion over breakfast, tackling the biggest challenges we all face.



Channel insight seminars

These are more tactical, deep-dive sessions held at our office in Manchester. Our specialists share what's working right now in channels like SEO, Paid Media, and Digital PR.

Sign up for our upcoming events:



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The only constant is change, and even some of the AI tech we've discussed will evolve by Q2, new buyer trends will emerge, and Google's algorithm will shift, again. Your education can't stop with this document.

Fear not, we track these changes for you, so you can stay focused on your job.

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The journey to becoming a true revenue-led, AI-enabled marketing function is a significant one. If at any stage you are looking for a strategic partner to help you implement these changes and drive results across every channel, our team is here.

For a direct, no-obligation conversation about your specific goals and how we can apply these principles to your business, please get in touch at info@embryo.com.

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