

skai®



Q3 2026

Quarterly Trends Report



Introduction

FULL-FUNNEL INVESTMENT AND AI ADOPTION AHEAD OF THE HOLIDAYS

With holiday shopping underway, advertisers are balancing investment across channels and formats, evaluating the role of AI in campaign execution, and deciding how to allocate remaining Q4 budgets. Q3 performance offers timely evidence for those decisions, from Amazon DSP investment growth and lower click costs to rising AI Max adoption and TikTok's growing share of paid social spend. Prime Big Deal Days adds another layer of insight, showing how ramp-up timing and event-day conversion rates can inform Cyber 5 planning. These findings also set the stage for evaluating seasonal performance and preparing for Q1 2027.

Q3 2026 offers several useful lessons. Prime Day moved into June for the first time since 2021, Walmart held its deals event in June as well, and Prime Big Deal Days pulled 25 of its 30 ramp-up days into September. Retail media spend grew 7% year over year as clicks rose 20% and CPC fell 11%. Amazon DSP investment grew 34%, while average CPC fell 44% to \$0.99, close to Sponsored Products at \$0.94. Across Amazon advertising, CPC fell 16%, but conversions rose just 1% as conversion rates declined 11%. These findings show how cost efficiency can tell only part of the story when evaluating campaign performance.

Search and social added further context. Google AI Max adoption reached 66% of accounts in September, up from 38% in January, while its share of Google spend more than doubled from 7% to 16%. Paid search CPC growth eased from 14% in Q2 to 7% in Q3. In paid social, CPM rose 20%, yet a 28% increase in click-through rate helped CPC fall 6%. TikTok's share of paid social spend climbed from 13% to 20%. Together, these results show how advertisers are allocating budgets as media costs, engagement, and automated campaign execution evolve.

While not part of Q3, we include results of early October's Prime Big Deal Days to offer marketers practical guidance to put the final touches on their Cyber 5 plans. Ramp-up clicks cost 28% less than event-day clicks, while event-day conversion rates were 15% higher. DSP ramp-up clicks increased 76% year over year, and DSP accounted for 27% of attributed event revenue on 24% of spend. These findings give advertisers concrete benchmarks for evaluating investment timing and format performance throughout the holiday period.

The report also looks ahead to Q1 2027. Post-holiday comparisons can be difficult to interpret as seasonal demand recedes, Performance Max normalizes after its Q4 surge, and social CPM inflation continues. The final section outlines ways to establish useful January baselines, evaluate post-holiday performance, and prepare budgets and campaigns for February.

We hope this Q3 2026 Quarterly Trends Report helps inform your planning for the months ahead.



What you'll find in this report

Since 2010, Skai has published industry-benchmark analysis through its Quarterly Trends Report (QTR), tracking digital advertising campaign performance for more than 15 years. The scale and diversity of our platform data provide a broad view of advertiser behavior, with benchmark metrics that have historically aligned closely with leading publisher earnings reports.

The report also covers developments in AI and agentic marketing, helping marketers assess how automated campaign execution and external AI agents are influencing media decisions.

The data comes from Skai's omnichannel platform and represents nearly **1 trillion impressions, 10 billion clicks, and \$10 billion in advertising spend** across five quarters, spanning multiple countries and industry categories. Unless noted otherwise, year-over-year comparisons use advertisers with 15 consecutive months of spending to limit distortions from account turnover.

- **Seven-year channel trends** across retail media, paid search, and paid social.
- **Retail media analysis** covering Amazon, Walmart, emerging networks, formats, and category benchmarks.
- **Prime Big Deal Days findings** on ramp-up and event-day performance, DSP investment, and Cyber 5 pacing.
- **Paid search and paid social trends** covering CPC, Performance Max, AI Max, TikTok investment, and social engagement.
- **AI and agentic marketing updates** on AI-led campaign adoption, external agent developments, and media decisions.
- **Q4 optimization and a Q1 reset guide** covering budget pacing, seasonal comparisons, and post-holiday planning.

High-level takeaways



Retail media growth reflects a calendar change.

Standalone Q3 spend increased 7% year over year as clicks rose 20% and CPC fell 11%. Combined Q2 and Q3 spend grew approximately 16%, with clicks up roughly 23%, reflecting Prime Day's move from Q3 last year to Q2 this year. Walmart and other retail media networks each recorded 37% spend growth.



Amazon DSP investment grew as click costs fell.

DSP spend increased 34% year over year, while average CPC declined 44% to \$0.99, close to Sponsored Products at \$0.94. With the cost difference between formats now relatively small, advertisers can assess their respective roles in audience building and demand capture.



Lower Amazon CPC coincided with modest conversion growth.

Across Amazon advertising, CPC fell 16%, conversion rates declined 11%, and conversions rose 1%. The findings illustrate why click costs alone provide an incomplete view of campaign performance.



Search CPC growth eased as AI Max adoption expanded.

Paid search CPC growth slowed from 14% in Q2 to 7% in Q3. AI Max reached 66% of Google accounts in September, up from 38% in January, while its share of Google spend rose from 7% to 16%. Automatic upgrades contributed to adoption, making campaign settings and business outcomes relevant when evaluating AI-led execution.



Social engagement helped offset higher impression costs.

CPM rose 20%, while CTR increased 28%, allowing CPC to fall 6%. TikTok's share of paid social spend also climbed from 13% to 20%, adding another consideration to platform allocation ahead of the holiday season.



Prime Big Deal Days reinforced the value of ramp-up planning 30 days before big retail events.

Ramp-up clicks cost 28% less than event-day clicks, while event-day conversion rates were 15% higher. DSP ramp-up clicks increased 76% year over year, and DSP generated 27% of attributed event revenue on 24% of spend. For Cyber 5, these results offer practical benchmarks for evaluating investment timing and performance throughout the event.



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About Skai

Recent news and milestones

Marketers are busy (as you already know), and it's very easy to miss a key bit of news or research that could affect your planning, media buying, and advertising strategy.

Below are eight key highlights from Q3 worth noting for your planning.



1 [ChatGPT Ads passed a \\$1 billion run rate in under 200 days](#)

OpenAI said on August 31 that ChatGPT Ads reached a \$1 billion annualized revenue run rate less than 200 days after launch and opened self-serve buying through Ads Manager in India, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. A conversational surface now has a self-serve, CPC-bid ad product with a revenue line most networks would envy. For Q4, it is a test budget. For Q1, it is a line item.

2 [OpenAI is testing ads that open a chat with the brand's agent](#)

In the Sponsored Agent pilot, reported September 16, clicking a ChatGPT ad opens a labeled conversation with the advertiser's own AI agent inside ChatGPT. Wayfair is taking part at limited scale. The shopper stays in ChatGPT instead of landing on your site, so the agent you attach to the ad carries the whole conversion job. Product data, pricing, and availability have to be good enough for an agent to sell from.

3 [Google made AI Max the default and put ads inside AI Mode answers](#)

On September 1, Google began auto-upgrading Search campaigns that use automatically created assets or campaign-level broad match to AI Max. One study of more than 50,000 commercial keywords reportedly found ads inside AI Mode answers on close to 30% of them, and on more than half of terms above \$10 CPC. October is the first full month under the new default, which makes it the month to compare cost per conversion against a September baseline.

4 [Gartner: AI will shape more than 70% of ad spend by 2028](#)

Gartner's August 6 forecast puts more than 70% of global ad spend, and 80% of US spend, on self-serve platforms where AI shapes buying, pricing, and results by 2028. Its advice is to favor platforms that support independent measurement, because better platform economics do not automatically mean lower costs for advertisers. That is the strongest argument this quarter for cross-publisher measurement that sits outside any one platform.

5 [AI search cut organic traffic 10.5% while AI referrals rose 163%](#)

Brainlabs data from 54 advertisers found organic search sessions fell 10.5% after AI Overviews became common, while referral traffic from AI platforms rose 163% and visitors from ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, and Perplexity completed key events at roughly 1.5 times the organic-search rate. Fewer visits arrive, and they tend to be worth more. Paid search is seeing the same pattern from the other side: fewer impressions, more clicks per impression.

6 [Social platforms opened their ad tools to outside AI agents](#)

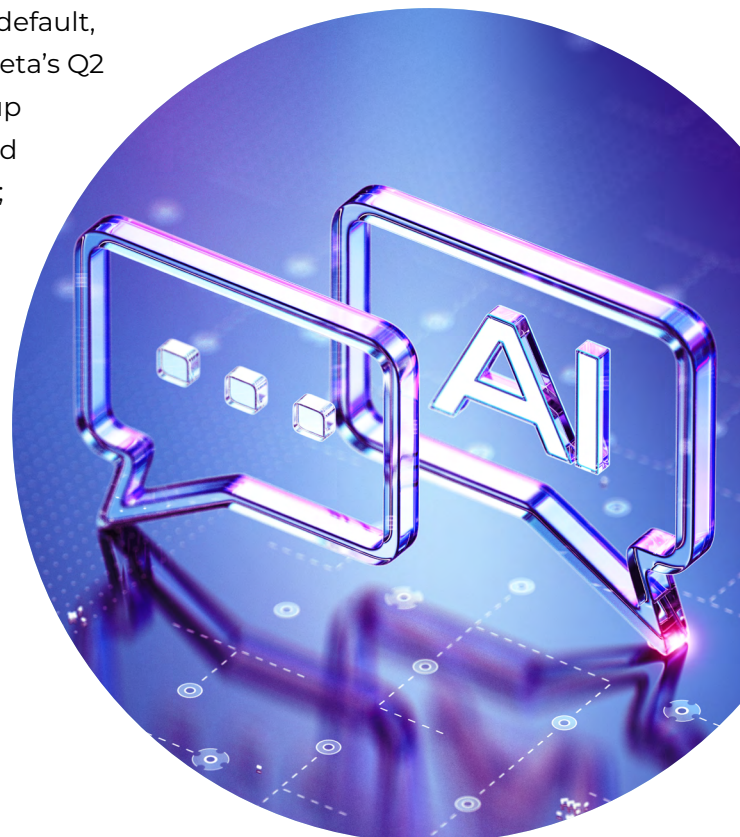
Meta released a first-party MCP server for ads on July 16 with read and write access. X launched an Ads MCP server, and TikTok, Pinterest, and Snapchat announced similar integrations. Marketers can now run cross-platform analysis and campaign changes from one AI assistant. The practical consequence is governance: which agent is allowed to write to which account, and who approves the change?

7 [The IAB is building a way to credit AI for conversions](#)

The IAB is drafting a framework to measure and credit AI's role in conversions, including cases where an AI system compares products or completes a purchase and no referrer or UTM parameter survives. Until it is released, agent-assisted journeys sit inside direct and unknown traffic. Tag what you can now, so the baseline exists when the standard arrives.

8 [Meta's Advantage+ now rewrites the headline text inside ad images](#)

Since late July, Advantage+ has rewritten headline text baked into uploaded images, generating variants that are on by default, with a Branding setting and a per-creative opt-out. Meta's Q2 earnings also reported the average price per ad was up 12% year-over-year. With social CPMs rising, automated creative variation is useful when the brand layer is set; fill out the Branding section before you let it run on Q4 creative.





Commerce media long-term trends

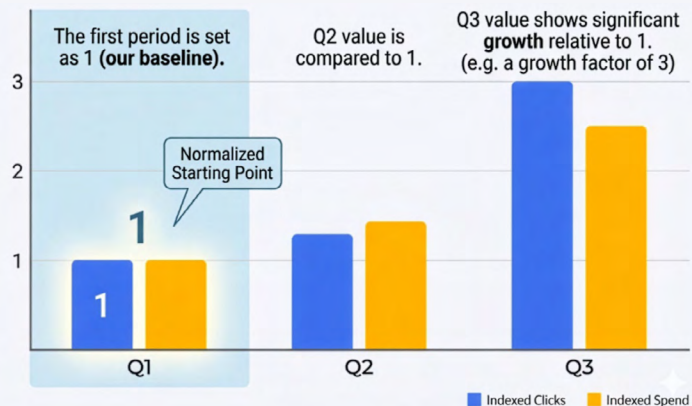
While Q3 2026 is the focus of this report, we like to start with a longer view of each of our three key digital ad channels to help set the context against the historic backdrop. It helps with the analysis of the quarter to understand where it sits in the long-term trend of that channel.

READING INDEXED CHARTS

Setting a 1 Baseline

Note on indexed charts in this section

Indexed charts show the shape of change against a Q1 2019 starting point. A bar at 10 means ten times the 2019 level for that channel, and says nothing about one channel's size relative to another.

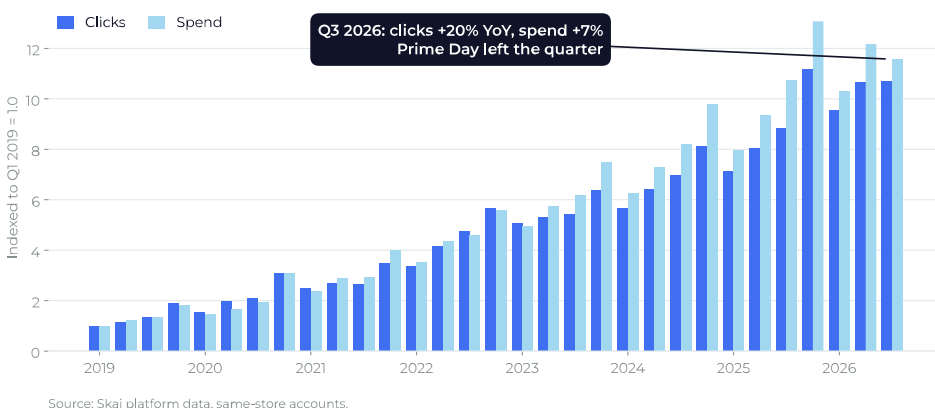


Retail media volume evolution over time

Retail media spend and clicks have each grown roughly tenfold since Q1 2019, and the two lines have tracked each other the whole way. From Q3 2023 through Q2 2024, rising CPCs added 10 to 20 points to spend growth. Since 2025, clicks have carried the growth at flat or lower CPCs. In Q3 2026, spend growth came in at 7%, the lowest on this chart, as Prime Day moved from July to June.

Retail media: spend and clicks have grown together for seven years

Indexed quarterly spend and clicks, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



A channel whose clicks grow in step with spend is still adding inventory as fast as advertisers add money. That is why the low Q3 reading is a calendar effect: clicks grew 20% in the same quarter. For forecasting, build retail media on clicks and conversion rate, because those are the inputs that have moved consistently, and treat CPC as a check on the forecast.

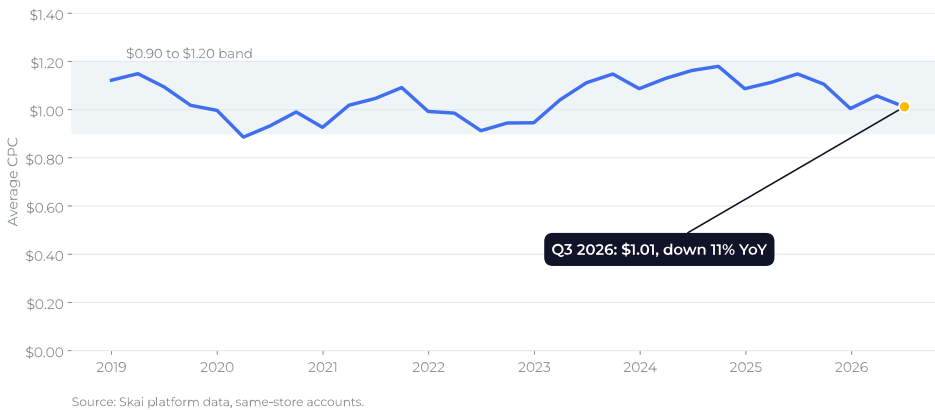
Recommended action for you: Rebase your retail media forecast on click volume and conversion rate; keep CPC as a sanity check.

Historical stability of retail media cost-per-click

Retail media CPC has stayed between \$0.90 and \$1.20 since 2019, even as spend grew about tenfold. Q3 2026 came in at \$1.01, down 11% year-over-year and inside the band once again.

Retail media CPC has held near a dollar through tenfold growth

Average cost per click by quarter, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



Seven years of flat pricing against tenfold demand means supply has expanded at the same pace: more retailer networks, more off-site inventory, and in-store screens have added space faster than prices could rise. New placements tend to be cheapest early, before the bidding density catches up. If CPC ever holds above \$1.20 for two quarters running, the growth phase is over; nothing in Q3 suggests that is close.

Recommended action for you: Claim new placements and networks while their CPCs still sit under the band.

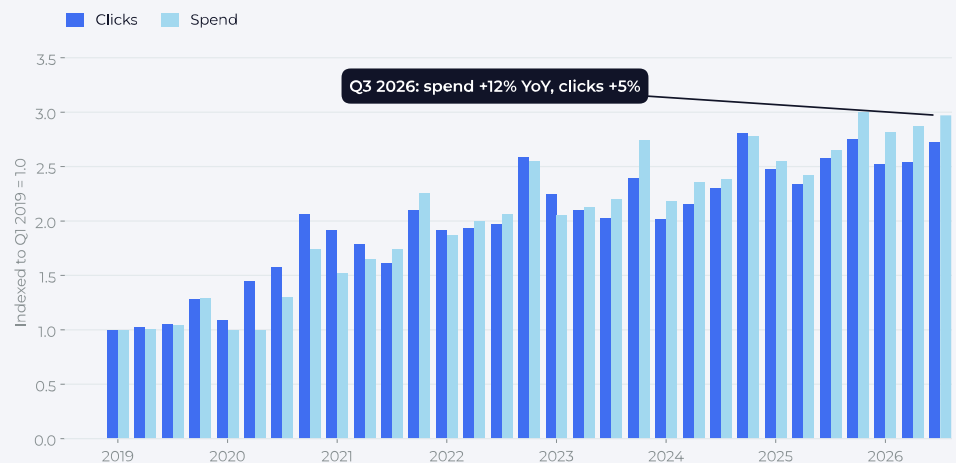
Paid search volume trends and click dynamics

Paid search spend has roughly tripled since 2019 and set a new high in Q3 2026 at an index of 2.97. Clicks grew too, but the two lines have separated over the last two years. Q3 2026 spend rose 12% year-over-year while clicks rose 5%.

About two-thirds of Google searches now end without a click because AI answers resolve the query on the page. The clicks that remain skew toward commercial intent, which is why spend keeps growing against a flat click base: advertisers are paying for a smaller pool of better clicks. Forecasting search on click growth will keep producing misses. Forecast it on value per click.

Paid search: spend keeps rising while clicks flatten

Indexed quarterly spend and clicks, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



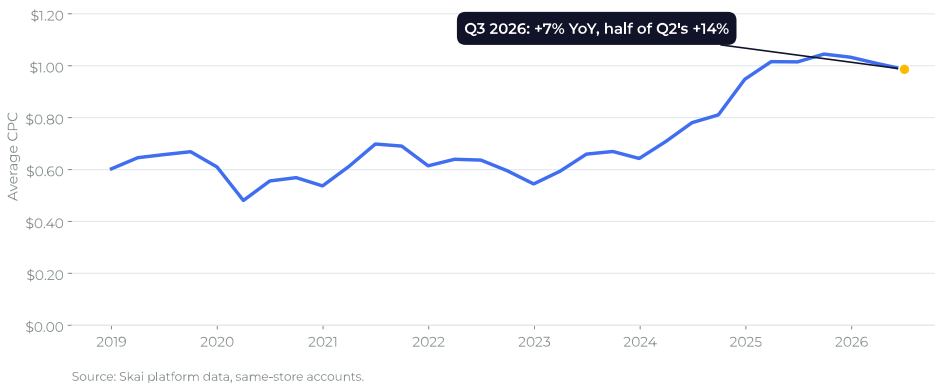
Recommended action for you: Replace click-volume targets in your search forecast with conversion value per click.

Long-term shift in paid search click costs

Search CPC held near \$0.60 from 2019 through early 2024, then climbed to about \$1.00 by early 2025, a rise of roughly 60% in two years. Through 2026, it has leveled: Q3 came in at \$0.99, up 7% year-over-year against +14% in Q2.

Paid search CPC climbed about 60% in two years after five flat ones

Average cost per click by quarter, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



AI answers absorb the cheap informational searches, so the clicks that remain cost more. A higher price floor of that kind cannot be bid away, and the cooling growth rate suggests the market has mostly repriced. Two responses work together: raise conversion on every click you buy, and send reach budget to the channels where ad space is still growing, retail media and social.

Recommended action for you: Hold search budget for high-intent terms; move incremental reach dollars to retail media and social.

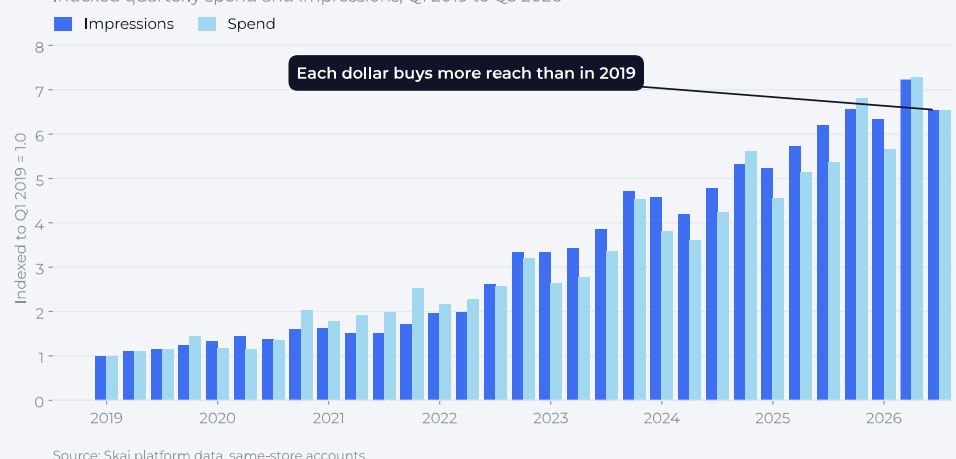
Paid social impression expansion vs. investment growth

Social impressions have grown about 6.5 times since 2019 while spend grew around 6.5 times through Q2 2026, with impressions running ahead of spend for most of the period. Each dollar buys more reach than it did seven years ago.

Short-form video created the inventory: Reels, Shorts, and TikTok feeds added ad slots faster than budgets filled them. Search and social now run in opposite directions, with search space contracting and social space expanding. The planning rule that follows is simple. Buy reach in social, capture demand in search, and judge each by the job it does.

Paid social: impressions have grown faster than spend since 2019

Indexed quarterly spend and impressions, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



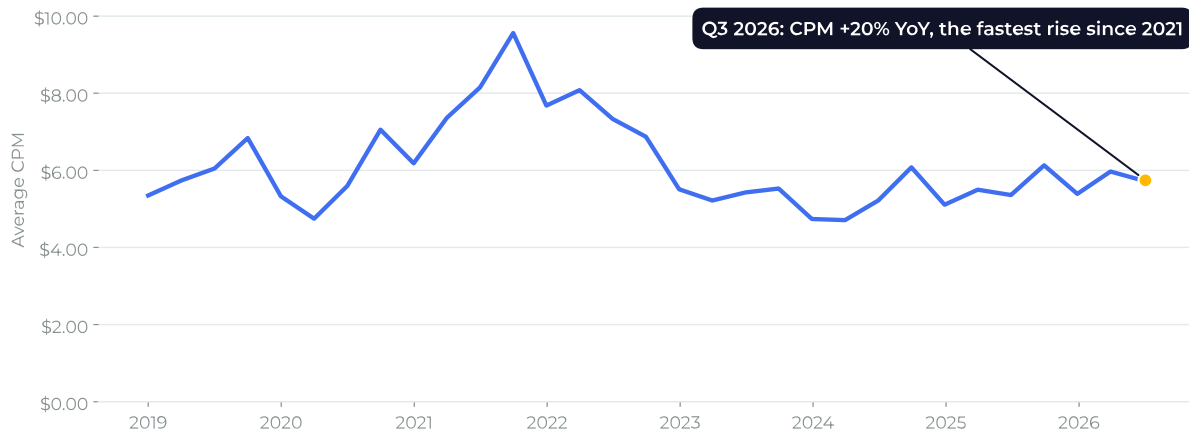
Recommended action for you: Assign reach objectives to social and demand-capture objectives to search in your Q4 and Q1 plans.

Paid social impression cost trajectory

Social CPM spiked above \$9 in late 2021 and has since settled in the \$5 to \$6 range, close to where it started in 2019. Q3 2026 came in near \$5.75, up 20% year-over-year, the fastest rise since the 2021 peak.

Paid social CPM sits near its 2019 level despite 6.5x the spend

Average CPM by quarter, Q1 2019 to Q3 2026



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Cheap reach is real, and a flat price can hide weaker performance: more impressions in faster feeds mean more scroll-pasts per dollar. The 20% rise in Q3 is the first meaningful pressure on social pricing in several years, and Meta's own earnings point the same way. Judge social on conversions and sales, with CPM as the cost input.

Recommended action for you: Report social on cost per conversion and revenue; keep CPM as a diagnostic, not a KPI.





Retail media in detail: Q3 2026

As you review this section, keep in mind that Prime Day in 2025 occurred in July (Q3), while this year it was in June (Q2). That giant four-day event and its high-spend ramp-up period distorts the year-over-year (YoY) analysis tremendously.

In a few sections, we blend Q2 & Q3 to compare 2025 vs 2026 a bit more apples-to-apples, but we've left the pure Q3 numbers as the core of the analysis.

Retail media Q3 2026: clicks outgrew spend by 13 points

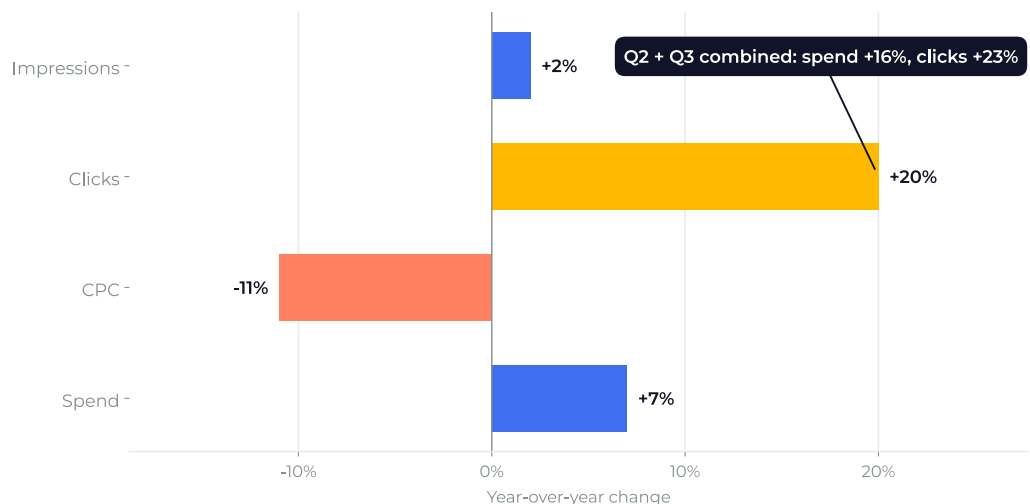
+7%
SPEND YOY

+20%
CLICKS YOY

+17%
CTR YOY

-11%
CPC YOY

Year-over-year change, Q3 2026 vs Q3 2025



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Retail media spend grew 7% year-over-year in Q3 2026, clicks grew 20%, click-through rate rose 17%, and impressions barely moved at +2%. Blended CPC fell 11%, partly because cheaper off-site DSP clicks grew faster than on-site ones.

Prime Day moved to June, so this year's Q3 lost its biggest week while last year's Q3 kept it. Combine Q2 and Q3 and spend is up about 16% with clicks up about 23%, which is the same growth profile as the rest of the year. Clicks outrunning spend by 13 points on a flat impression base means shoppers clicked more of the ads they saw. Before you call any retail media number a slowdown, run the same Q2-plus-Q3 comparison on your own account. Q4 will read cleaner, because Prime Big Deal Days fell in October both years.

Recommended action for you: Compare your Q2 plus Q3 against last year's Q2 plus Q3 before fully benchmarking against your own programs.

Retail media by month

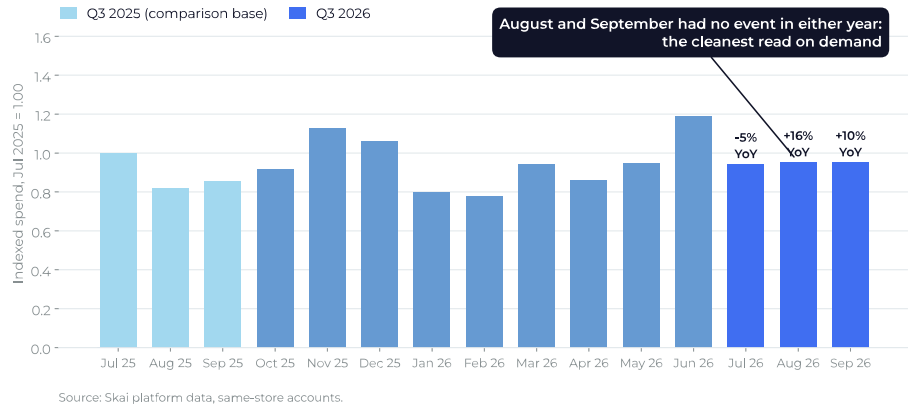
Both years follow the same rhythm: a big event month, then a drop of about 20% the next month. Only the event month changed position. July 2026 spend fell 5% year-over-year against a July that held Prime Day; August rose 16% and September rose 10%, and neither of those months had an event in either year.

August and September are the cleanest read on underlying demand this quarter, and they sit in the mid-teens, consistent with the full-year

pace. The post-event drop is the number to carry into Q4 pacing: the week after each tentpole will run about a fifth below the event month, and the efficient days are usually in that trough, when no discount is helping. Judge campaign efficiency in the quiet weeks, because that is where your always-on economics show.

Retail media by month: the event month moved, the quiet months grew

Indexed monthly spend, Jul 2025 to Sep 2026



Recommended action for you: Build the post-event drop into your Q4 pacing and measure efficiency in the quiet weeks.

Five quarters at a glance

The table indexes retail media volume against Q3 2025 and lines up the last five quarters. Clicks sit 20% above the base, spend 7% above, impressions roughly flat. CPC has stayed within 13 cents all year, and CTR has climbed from 0.40% to 0.47%.

Metric	Q3 2025	Q4 2025	Q1 2026	Q2 2026	Q3 2026
Impressions*	1.00	1.13	0.94	1.12	1.02
Clicks*	1.00	1.21	1.06	1.21	1.20
Spend*	1.00	1.16	0.94	1.12	1.07
CPC	\$1.13	\$1.08	\$1.00	\$1.05	\$1.01
CTR	0.40%	0.43%	0.46%	0.44%	0.47%

*Indexed volume (Q3 2025 = 1.00). CPC and CTR shown as reported.

Two rows carry the story. The clicks row shows Q3 2026 at 1.20 with Q2 2026 at 1.21, so click volume held through a quarter without its tentpole. The CTR row has risen in four of the last five quarters, so the extra impressions advertisers bought were better matched as well as more numerous. Use this table as the planning baseline for what normal looks like heading into Q4, where the Q4 2025 column (clicks 1.21, spend 1.16) is the shape to beat.

Recommended action for you: Set Q4 targets against the Q4 2025 column: clicks 1.21, spend 1.16, CPC \$1.08.

Retail media ROAS stayed inside a \$1 band for five quarters

Aggregating ROAS across the thousands of brands in the Skai Quarterly Trends dataset remains challenging. Consequently, we consistently advise against fixating solely on absolute dollar figures when benchmarking retail media programs; instead, monitor quarter-over-quarter fluctuations to evaluate how your ROAS trajectory aligns with broader industry dynamics.

Aggregate return on ad spend ran between \$5.64 and \$6.60 across the last five quarters. In Q3 2026, advertisers raised spend 7% and sales from ads still grew about 1%, against a Q3 last year that included Prime Day.



A steady range through a year of heavy growth is a strong baseline, and it works best as a guardrail. The aggregate hides a wide distribution, and the useful question for your own program is marginal: what did the last budget increase return, and where is the next dollar working hardest? Marginal ROAS by format and retailer, over the last two quarters, is the analysis that decides Q4 reallocations. Blended ROAS will tell you whether the whole program is healthy; it will not tell you where to move money.

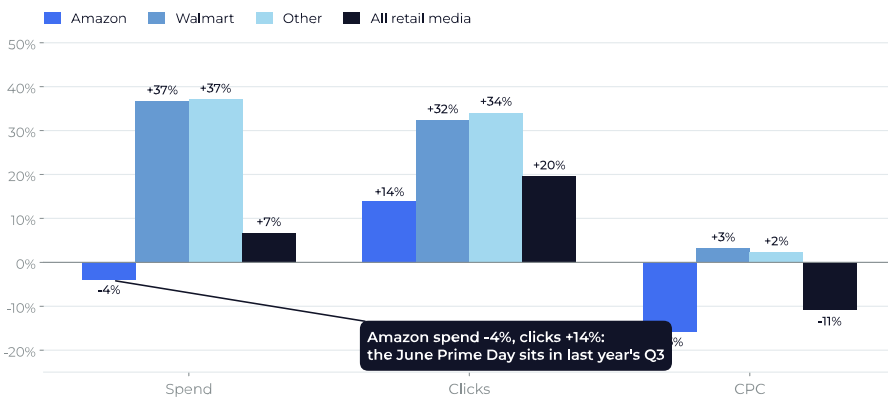
Recommended action for you: Compute marginal ROAS on your last two budget increases, by retailer and format, before touching Q4 mix.

Walmart and other networks grew 37%

Without Prime Day in July, Amazon advertisers spent 4% less year-over-year with clicks up 14% and CPC down 16%. Walmart spend grew 37%, and the other networks matched it at 37%. Clicks on Walmart and the other networks rose 32% to 34% at CPCs that barely moved, up 2% to 3%.

Walmart and other networks grew 37% while Amazon's quarter lost Prime Day

Year-over-year change by retailer, Q3 2026



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Walmart also ran its deals event in June, and still grew 37% in Q3, so the calendar explains Amazon's quarter more than it explains the others. Each network's own reporting flatters itself, which makes cross-retailer comparison the one test worth running before Q4 money moves. Pick items sold at both retailers, split a slice of budget between them, keep creative identical, and compare incremental sales per dollar. That is a two-week test with a clean answer.

Recommended action for you: Run a matched-item, matched-creative split between Amazon and Walmart and compare incremental sales per dollar.

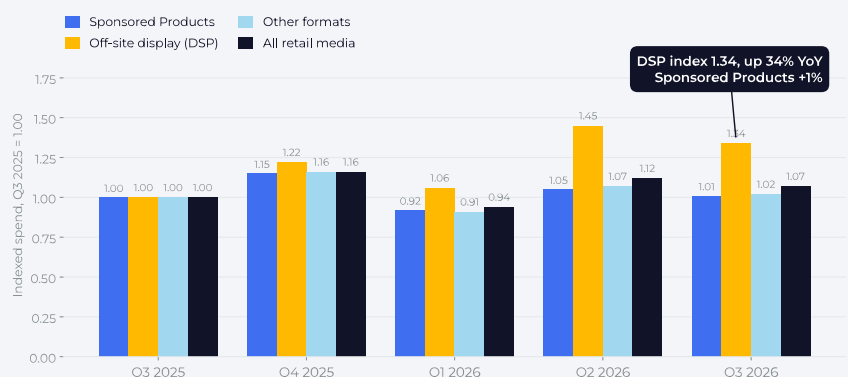
DSP kept most of its gain after Prime Day left Q3

DSP spend (labeled *off-site display*) sits 34% above last year while Sponsored Products is up about 1%. DSP indexed at 1.45 in Q2 with Prime Day in the quarter and 1.34 in Q3 without it, so most of the Q2 jump stayed. Total retail media spend indexed at 1.07.

When a format holds its gain through the quarter after a tentpole, the budget has moved upstream for good. The measurement risk is that DSP feeds Sponsored Products and branded search, and last-click reporting books the sale to the lower-funnel format. Watch whether Sponsored Products sales and branded search volume rise when DSP spend rises; if they do, a soft DSP last-click number is hiding its real contribution, and cutting DSP in Q4 would cut the demand that Sponsored Products harvests.

Off-site display (DSP) kept most of its gain after Prime Day left Q3

Indexed retail media spend by format, Q3 2025 = 1.00

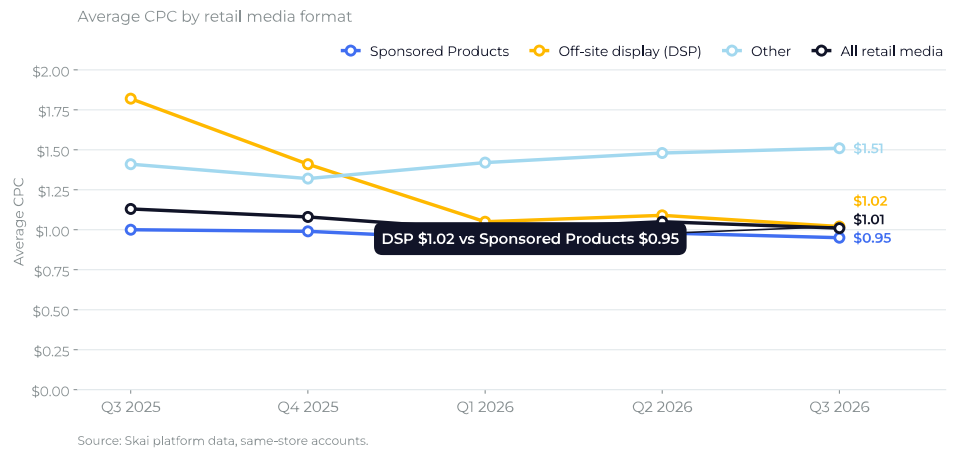


Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Recommended action for you: Track Sponsored Products sales and branded search alongside DSP spend; read DSP on total-account lift.

A DSP click now costs just 7% more than a Sponsored Products click, down from 82% more a year ago

A year ago DSP cost \$1.82 per click against \$1.00 for Sponsored Products, an 82% premium. In Q3 2026 DSP cost \$1.02 against \$0.95, a 7% premium. Other formats stayed highest at \$1.51; blended retail media CPC was \$1.01.



A few years ago, DSP used to be the pricey option to hold back; it is now priced like on-site search.

The two clicks still do different jobs: DSP usually appears across

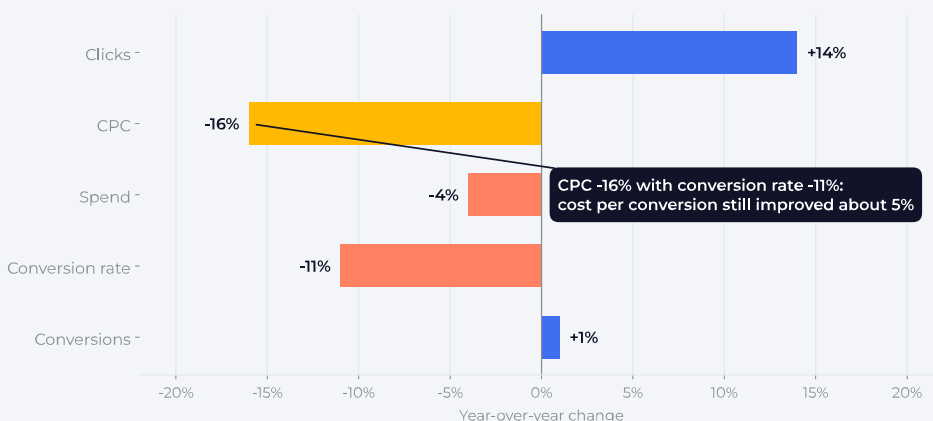
the shopper's full-funnel path and Sponsored Products often ends it. So the comparison that matters is cost per outcome at each stage, cost per new-to-brand shopper for DSP and cost per order for Sponsored Products, and the Q4 mix decision follows from those two numbers rather than from CPC.

Recommended action for you: Replace CPC with stage-specific cost per outcome when you set the DSP versus Sponsored Products mix for Q4.

Amazon: cheaper clicks, lower conversion rate, better cost per order

On Amazon, spend fell 4% while clicks rose 14%, because CPC dropped 16%. Conversion rate slipped 11%, so conversions grew just 1%. Cost per conversion still improved by about 5%.

Year-over-year change, Q3 2026 vs Q3 2025



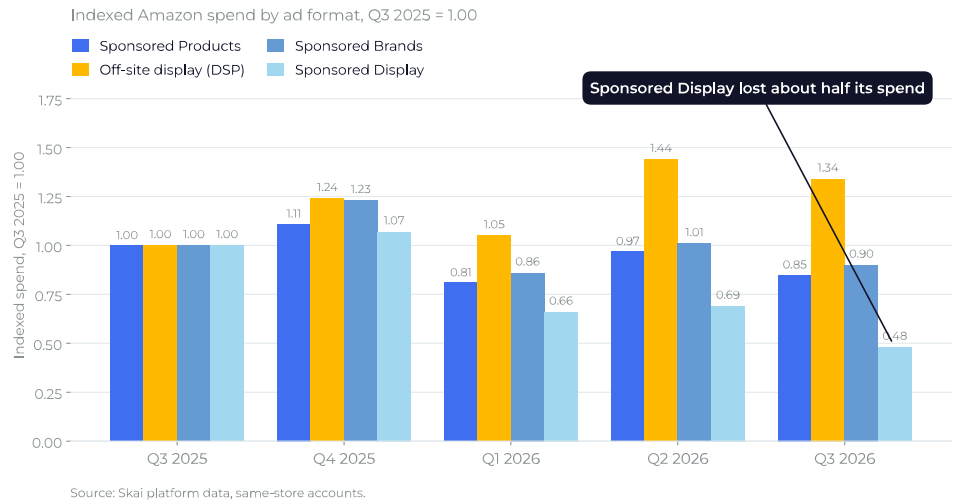
Cheaper clicks again are likely due to not paying for the premium that is Prime Day. The check for your own account is whether cost per order moved the right way, and by how much, before the CPC number goes in a deck.

Recommended action for you: Report Amazon efficiency on cost per order, with CPC and conversion rate shown as its two inputs.

On Amazon, only DSP finished the quarter above last year

By Amazon ad format, DSP indexed at 1.34 against Q3 2025. Sponsored Products indexed at 0.85 and Sponsored Brands at 0.90; both lean on Prime Day, so a quarter without it reads lower. Sponsored Display indexed at 0.48, losing about half its spend.

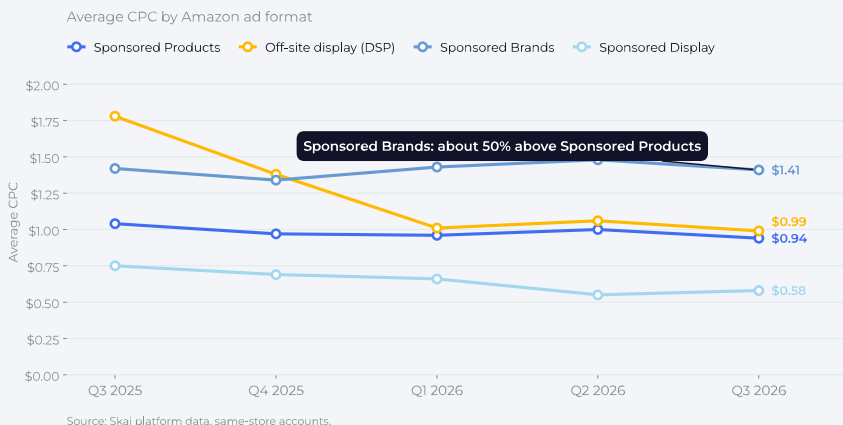
The Sponsored Products and Sponsored Brands dips are mostly calendar. The Sponsored Display halving looks like an advertiser decision: a lower-funnel retargeting format giving way to DSP, which can do the same retargeting job with broader inventory and better reporting. If you still run Sponsored Display, the question for Q4 is whether it brings orders that DSP retargeting does not. If the audiences overlap, consolidate; if Sponsored Display reaches on-site shoppers DSP misses, keep it and size it to that job.



Recommended action for you: Audit Sponsored Display against DSP retargeting for audience overlap before Cyber 5.

Three of four Amazon formats got cheaper; Sponsored Brands held at \$1.41

Year-over-year, Sponsored Products CPC fell 9% to \$0.94, Sponsored Display fell 22% to \$0.58, and DSP fell 44% to \$0.99. Sponsored Brands held at \$1.41, down 1%, about 50% above Sponsored Products.

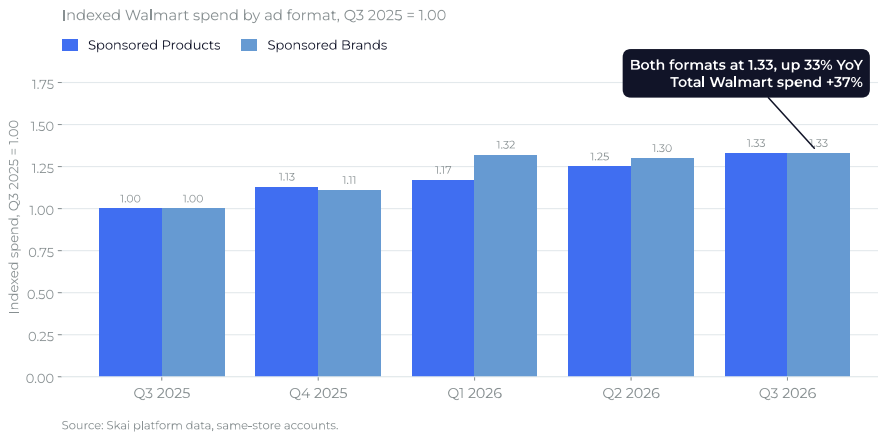


Brand-visible slots at the top of the results page are still where bidders compete, and Sponsored Brands carries that premium. Averages hide placement, though. Top-of-search Sponsored Products clicks cost far more than the \$0.94 average, and branded-term clicks far less. Split your own CPC two ways, top-of-search versus the rest and branded versus non-branded, and the Q4 bid plan will be built on four numbers that mean something instead of one that does not.

Recommended action for you: Split Amazon CPC by placement and by branded versus non-branded before setting Q4 bids.

On Walmart, Sponsored Products and Sponsored Brands are level for the first time

Walmart Sponsored Products and Sponsored Brands both indexed at 1.33 in Q3 2026, up 33% year-over-year, the first quarter the two have been level. Total Walmart spend grew 37%, so the fastest growth came from other formats.



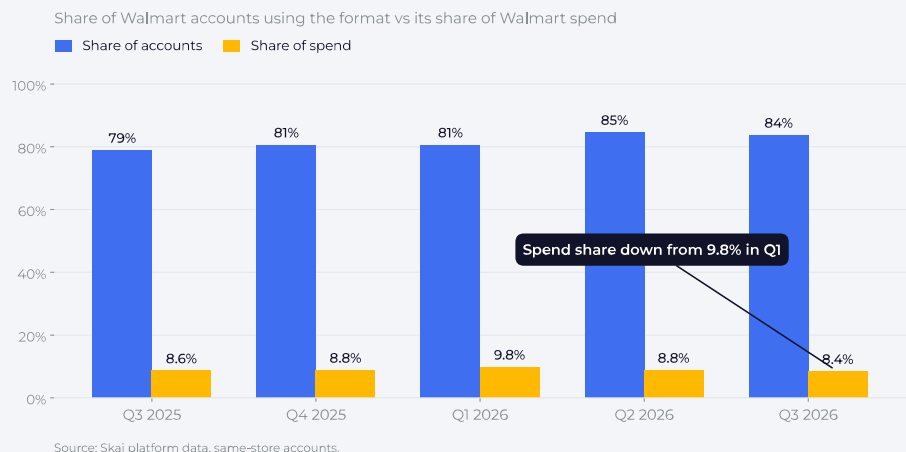
Walmart's growth is broad-based, and the part of it outside the two core formats is the part most programs have not planned for. Find which formats grew fastest in your own Walmart account, then ask what caused it: new inventory, new campaign types, or both. Q4 is when Walmart Connect's newer placements will get their first real volume test, and the accounts that know which ones worked in Q3 will have the pacing advantage.

Recommended action for you: Rank your Walmart formats by Q3 growth and note which came from new inventory versus new campaign types.

Walmart Sponsored Brands: run by 84% of accounts, funded with 8.4% of spend

Adoption rose through the year while spending eased. Advertisers are paying the higher click price and then funding the format lightly, which usually means the format is on because it should be, with no evidence yet about how much it deserves.

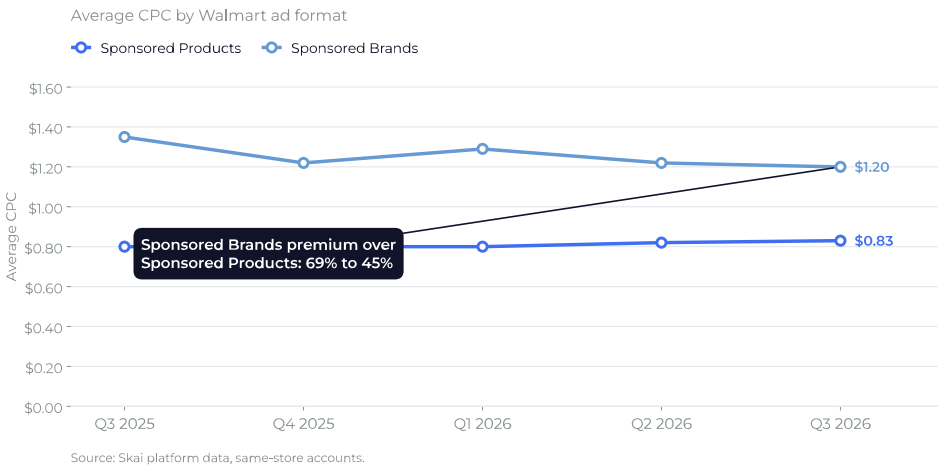
Give it a try if you aren't already. A four-week experiment settles it: raise Sponsored Brands to about 15% of your Walmart budget on category and competitor terms, and judge it on total category sales and search share. If nothing moves, your current share is right and you have learned that cheaply. If category sales move, you have found Q4 budget that was sitting idle.



Recommended action for you: Run a four-week Sponsored Brands test at 15% of Walmart budget, judged on category sales and search share.

Walmart Sponsored Products CPC has held at \$0.80 to \$0.83 for five quarters

Walmart Sponsored Products CPC has sat between \$0.80 and \$0.83 for five quarters while spend grew 33%. Sponsored Brands eased to \$1.20, cutting its premium over Sponsored Products from 69% a year ago to 45%.



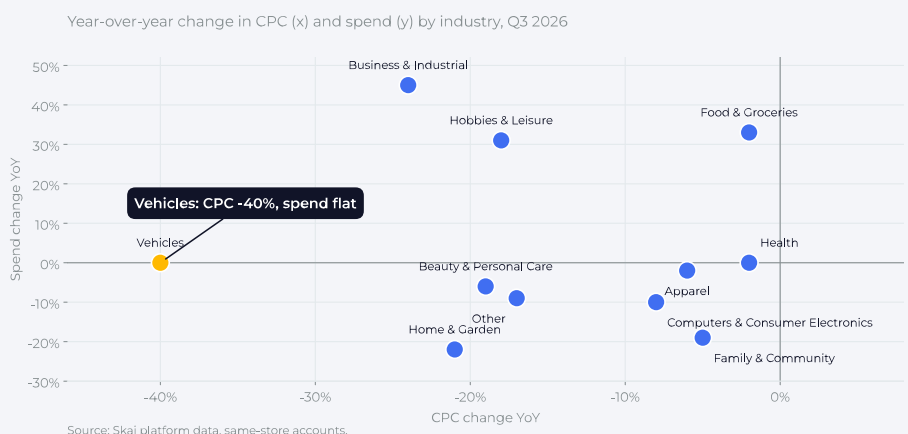
Rising demand at steady prices says the Walmart auction is not crowded yet. In that environment, coverage beats bids: adding items and keywords buys volume at the going rate, while raising bids on the same items just pays more for clicks you were already winning. Expand coverage first, and raise bids only on the terms where impression share is capped.

Recommended action for you: Add Walmart items and keywords before raising bids; reserve bid increases for impression-share-capped terms.

Retail media CPCs fell in ten of eleven categories; spend did not follow price

CPC fell year-over-year in ten of eleven retail media categories, yet spend moved independently of price. Vehicles saw CPC drop 40% with flat spend. Growth came from Business & Industrial (+45%), Food & Groceries (+33%), and Hobbies & Leisure (+31%). Home & Garden, Beauty, and Electronics cut spend.

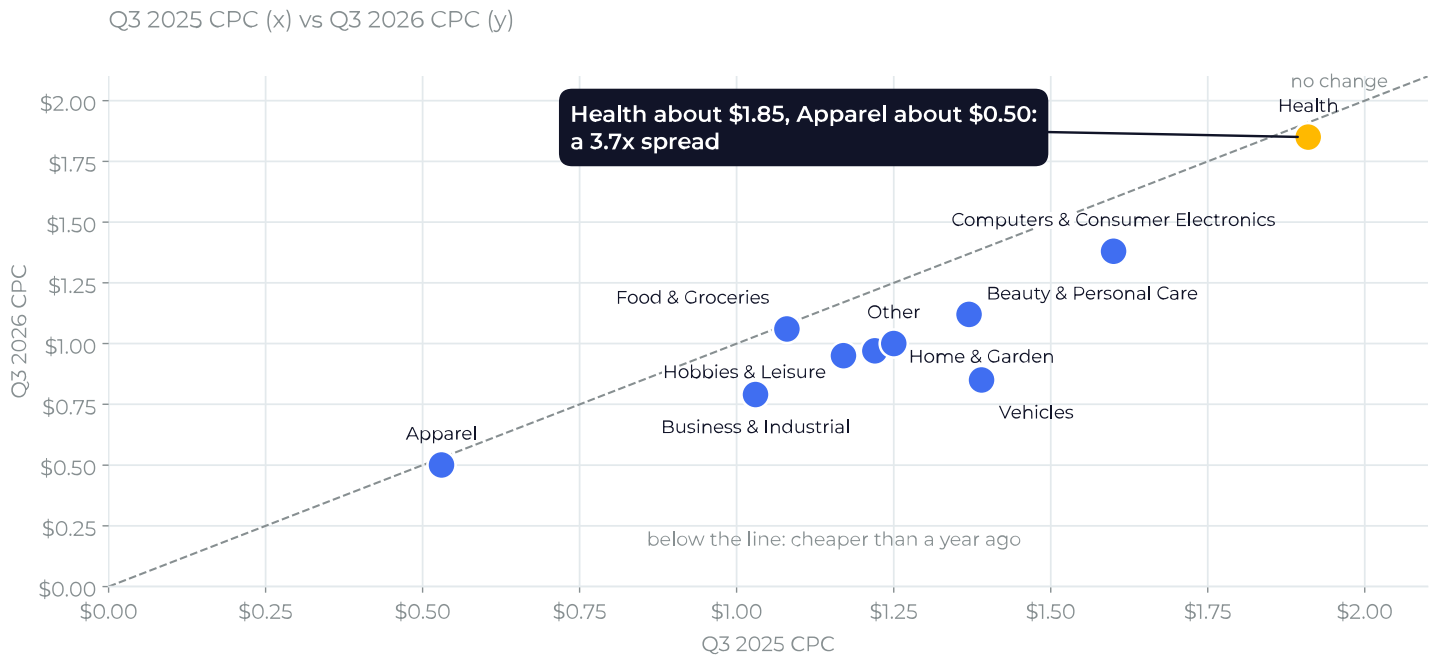
Home & Garden, Beauty and Electronics lean on event deals, so part of their Q3 dip is Prime Day moving to June. Cheaper clicks in your category are a green light only if last year's base did not hold your peak. Check which events sat in your category's Q3 2025 before you read a lower CPC as room to scale, and benchmark against the categories whose calendar matches yours.



Recommended action for you: Before scaling on a lower category CPC, confirm which events your category had in last year's Q3.

Retail media CPC by industry: nearly every category sits below the line

Plotting Q3 2025 CPC against Q3 2026 CPC, nearly every category sits below the no-change diagonal: clicks got cheaper almost everywhere. Health sits at about \$1.85 and Apparel at about \$0.50, a 3.7x spread that has held all year.



The spread is structural, driven by margin and competition, and a blended CPC benchmark across it is close to useless. The useful version of this chart is your own account plotted on it. If your CPC fell by less than your category's, you lost ground on price even though your number went down, and the explanation is usually placement mix or bid strategy. That is a Q4 fix you can make in a week.

Recommended action for you: Plot your account against your category's CPC change; if you fell less, review placement mix and bids.



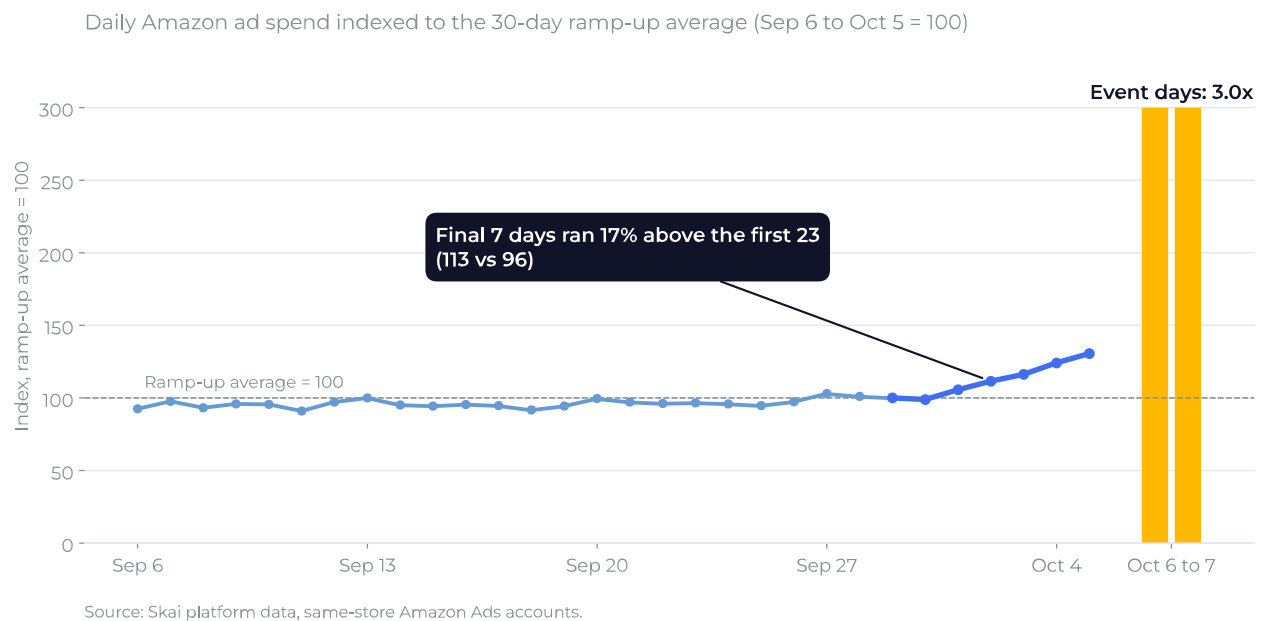


Prime Big Deal Days: an early look at Q4

Although Prime Big Deal Days ran October 6 to 7, it's the first big tentpole event of Q4 so we're sharing these results with you now rather than wait until Q1. Industry news reports that US consumers spent \$9.86 billion online across the two days, up from \$9.09 billion a year earlier, with mobile at 52% of sales. A third of shoppers completed at least half of their holiday shopping during the event, and average household spend at Amazon came in at \$114 against \$122 during June's Prime Day.

The ramp started in September

Event-day Amazon ad spend ran at 3.0x the ramp-up average, but advertisers began building in early September. Daily spend in the final seven days of the ramp ran 17% above the first 23 days (an index of 113 versus 96). Ramp-up clicks grew 9% year-over-year at a CPC 9% lower.



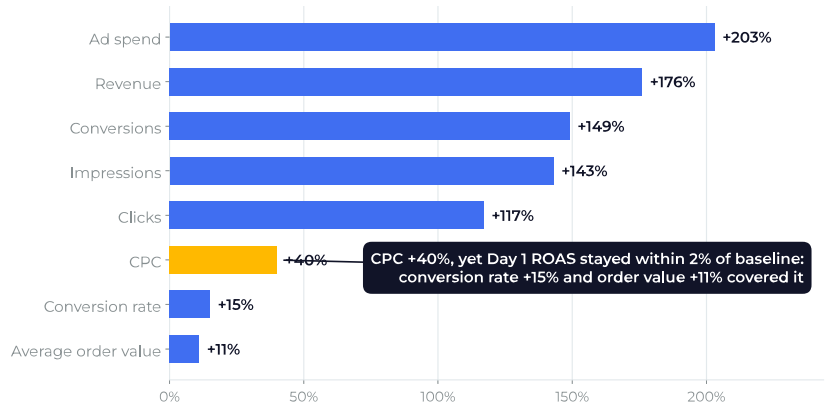
Advertisers who spent the ramp building audiences and testing creative arrived at October 6 with cheaper clicks and a tested plan. Black Friday is November 27; thirty days out is October 28. That is the date to start the Cyber 5 build, and it is already inside most Q4 budgets as unallocated pacing room.

Recommended action for you: Start the Cyber 5 ramp on October 28 and shape the 30 days like the September build.

Nearly 3X revenue at the peak, with returns intact

Against the 30-day ramp-up average, the two event days ran spend +203%, revenue +176%, conversions +149%, impressions +143%, and clicks +117%. CPC rose 40%, conversion rate rose 15%, and average order value rose 11%, so Day 1 ROAS stayed within 2% of baseline. Against last year's event, CPC was 9% lower and CTR 9% higher.

Event daily average vs the 30-day ramp-up daily average



Source: Skai platform data, same-store Amazon Ads accounts, Oct 6 to 7, 2026.

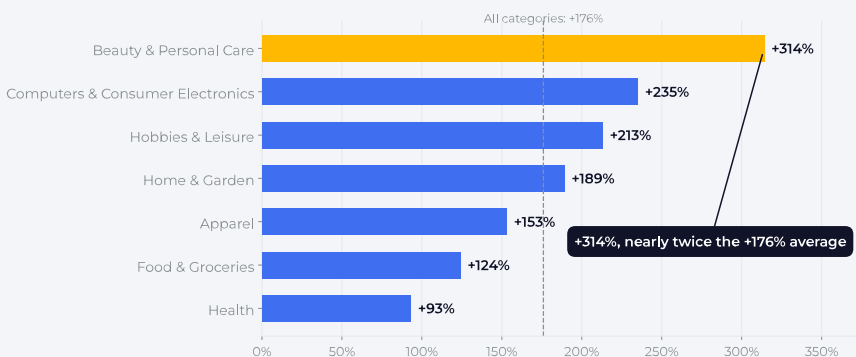
A 40% higher CPC that barely dents returns is what a healthy tentpole looks like: shoppers arrive ready to buy, so each click converts better and each order is larger. Ramp-up clicks cost 28% less than peak clicks, and peak clicks convert 15% better. Both windows pay, in different ways, which is the argument for budgeting the whole window. The Cyber 5 version of this is five days with a Thanksgiving-night mobile peak and a Cyber Monday bottom-funnel peak, and the ramp economics are the same.

Recommended action for you: Budget the Cyber 5 ramp and the five event days as one window; expect peak CPC +40% and plan the ROAS math now.

Beauty and electronics led the revenue lift

Beauty & Personal Care (+314%) and Computers & Consumer Electronics (+235%) led the revenue lift, ahead of the +176% average across categories. DSP earned 27% of event revenue on 24% of spend. Sponsored Brands orders averaged \$44 against \$36 for Sponsored Products. Adobe's industry data showed toys and electronics with the largest lifts over an average September day.

Revenue lift, event daily average vs 30-day ramp-up average, seven largest categories by spend



Source: Skai platform data, same-store Amazon Ads accounts, Oct 6 to 7, 2026.

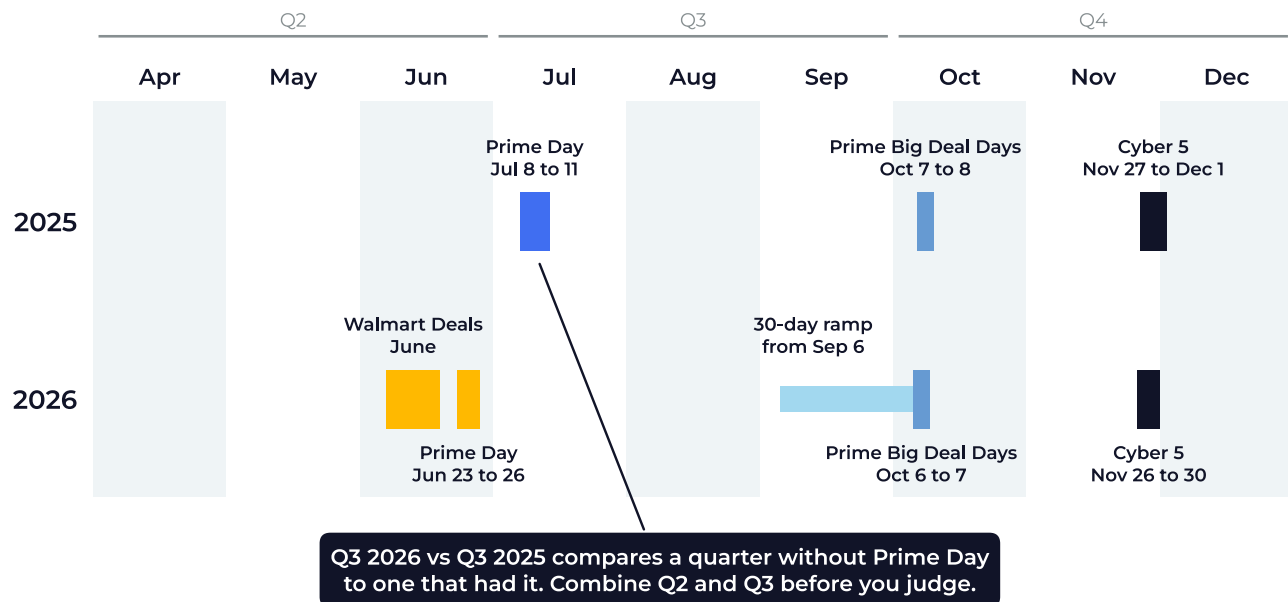
October is the litmus test for November. The products and audiences that surged during Prime Big Deal Days are likely the ones to put creative and budget behind for Cyber 5, and the format pairing is visible in the numbers: DSP builds the audience early (ramp-up DSP clicks rose 76% year-over-year) and Sponsored Brands lifts the basket. Design mobile first, since 52% of event sales were on phones, and let October's winners lead the November plan.

Recommended action for you: Let the Prime Big Deal Days winners set Cyber 5 bids and creative; pair DSP for audiences with Sponsored Brands for basket size.

Which events sat in each year's base

The calendar strip below shows why year-over-year reads need a footnote this year. Prime Day sat in July 2025 and June 2026. Walmart's deals event also ran in June 2026. Prime Big Deal Days ran in early October both years, with a 30-day ramp that started in September.

Major retail media events by month, 2025 vs 2026. The quarters stayed put; the events moved.



Source: Amazon and Walmart event calendars; Skai platform data for the ramp-up window.

The habit to build is a two-line check before any year-over-year number goes into a plan: which events were in this period, and which were in the base. If the lists differ, combine quarters or compare the quiet weeks. Q4 2026 against Q4 2025 will be clean for retail media, since the October event and Cyber 5 fall in the same quarter both years. Q2 and Q3 2027 will repeat this year's problem unless Prime Day moves again, so put the check in your reporting template now.

Recommended action for you: Add an events-in-base line to every YoY report; combine quarters when the lists differ.





Paid search trends

AI Overviews has changed paid search dramatically, and Q3 is the first quarter after over a year of rising CPCs visibly cooled. Spend still grew faster than clicks, the market still split into accounts paying more and accounts paying less, and the automation products kept absorbing budget. The AI Max auto-upgrade on September 1 makes October the first clean month under a new default.

Spend +12% bought 5% more clicks

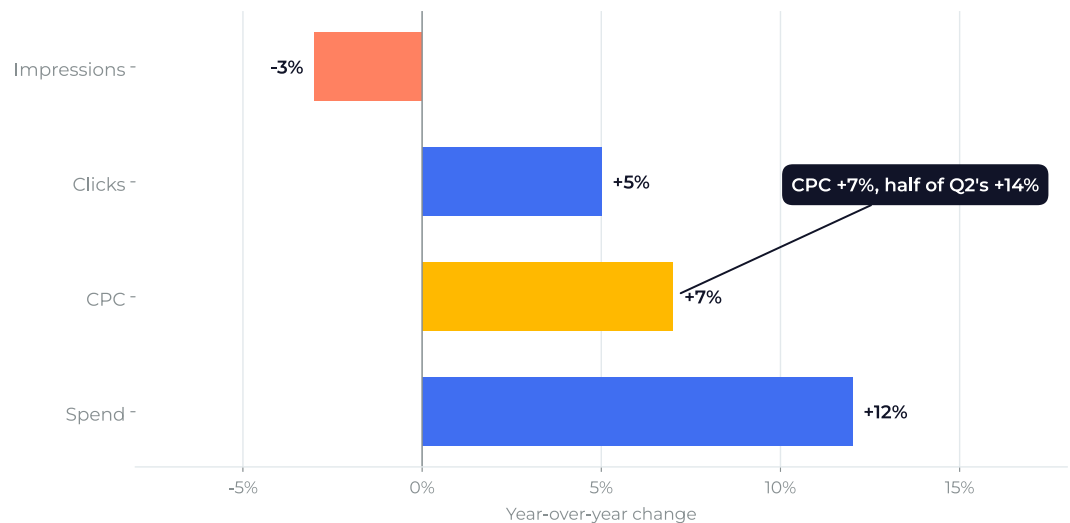
+12%
SPEND YOY

+5%
CLICKS YOY

+7%
CPC YOY

-3%
IMPRESSIONS
YOY

Year-over-year change, Q3 2026 vs Q3 2025



Paid search spend grew 12% year-over-year, down from 17% in Q2, and bought 5% more clicks. CPC rose 7%, half of last quarter's 14%. Impressions slipped 3% while clicks grew, so ads showed on fewer, better-matched searches.

Impressions down with clicks up is the signature of better matching, and it is the same pattern the Brainlabs organic data shows from the other side. Confirm it in your own account by comparing impression share to click share on your top queries: rising click share on flat impression share is the healthy version. Then check that those clicks convert at your target cost, because a better-matched click that does not convert is still a cost.

Recommended action for you: Compare impression share to click share on your top 50 queries; confirm conversion cost on the gainers.

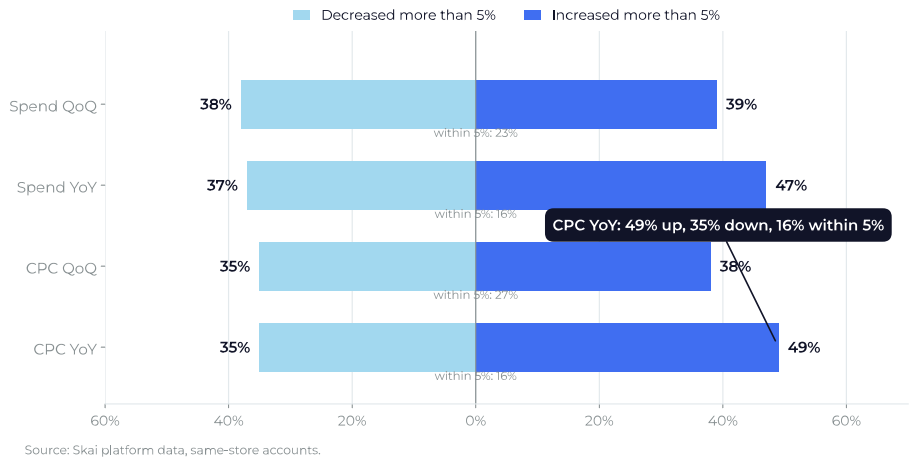
Account activity varied

Year-over-year, 49% of search accounts saw CPC rise more than 5%, 35% saw it fall more than 5%, and 16% stayed within 5%. On spend, 47% of accounts grew more than 5% year-over-year and 37% cut by more than 5%.

A market that splits this cleanly has no useful average. The third of accounts with falling CPCs are the interesting group, and the usual explanations are inside the account: match-type mix, brand versus non-brand weighting, and how much budget goes to broad queries. Find which group you are in, and if you are in the rising group, test the three levers the falling group is likely pulling. If you are in the falling group, make sure the cheaper clicks are converting before you take the win.

The +7% search CPC average describes 16% of accounts

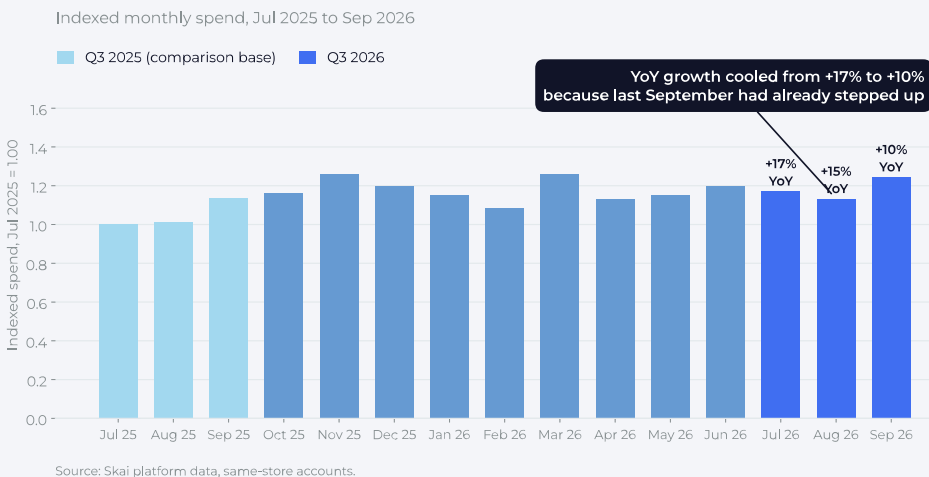
Share of Skai search accounts by direction of change, Q3 2026



Recommended action for you: Place your account in the distribution; if CPC rose, audit match types, brand mix, and broad-query budget.

September ended near the series high

Monthly search spend ended September at an index of 1.24, close to the series peaks of 1.26. Year-over-year growth cooled from +17% in July to +10% in September, because last year's September had already stepped up in 2025.



The same thing will happen in Q4. Last year's spend climbed into November, so this year's year-over-year growth will look smaller even if spend levels set records. Set Q4 search targets on spend level and efficiency, and tell stakeholders now, so that a +6% November is read correctly as a record month against a high base.

Recommended action for you: Reset Q4 search targets to spend level and cost per conversion; brief stakeholders on the base effect this week.

Nearly all search categories soared

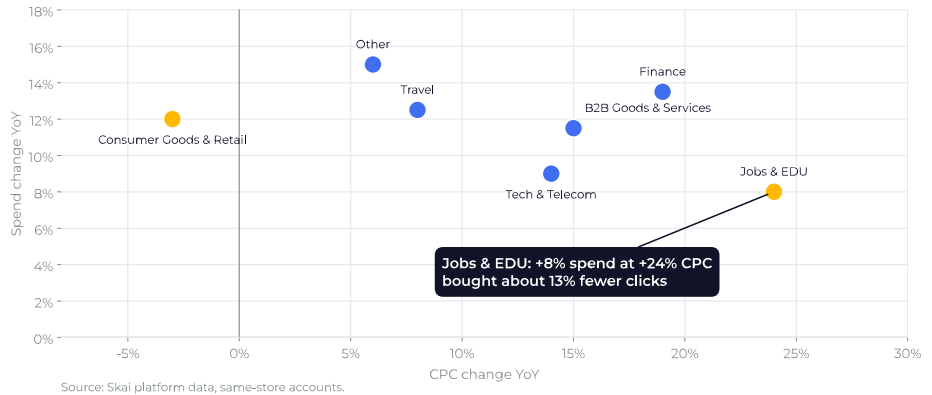
Every industry grew search spend year-over-year, between +7% and +15%, but CPC changes ranged from -3% in Consumer Goods & Retail to +24% in Jobs & EDU. Retail's +12% spend bought about 16% more clicks. Jobs & EDU's +8% spend bought about 13% fewer. Finance paid 19% more per click and B2B 15% more.

Divide your spend change by your CPC change and you get the clicks you really bought, which is the number that should sit next to

the spend line in every Q3 review. Categories with cost climbs like Finance and B2B have one lever left once bids are tuned: conversion rate and lead quality on the clicks they already win. That is landing-page and qualification work, and it is the highest-return search project for Q1 in those categories.

Every search industry grew spend; the clicks they bought varied widely

Year-over-year change in CPC (x) and spend (y) by industry, Q3 2026



Recommended action for you: Add a real-clicks-bought line (spend change divided by CPC change) to your Q3 search review.

The expensive categories were more expensive

B2B Goods & Services went from about \$5.35 to \$6.17 per click, a rise of \$0.82, which is more than the entire CPC of any category under \$1. Jobs & EDU and Finance sit near \$3. Travel, Consumer Goods & Retail, Other, and Tech & Telecom all sit under \$1.

Search CPC by industry: the most expensive categories rose the most

Q3 2025 CPC (x) vs Q3 2026 CPC (y)



At a six-to-one spread, an all-industry benchmark will mislead you. The benchmark that works is your own ceiling: conversion rate multiplied by value per conversion, divided by target ROAS, gives the most you can pay for a click. When the market passes it, there are three choices in order of preference: raise conversion rate, raise value per conversion, or walk away from those terms. Set the ceiling per campaign now, so the Q4 auction does not set it for you.

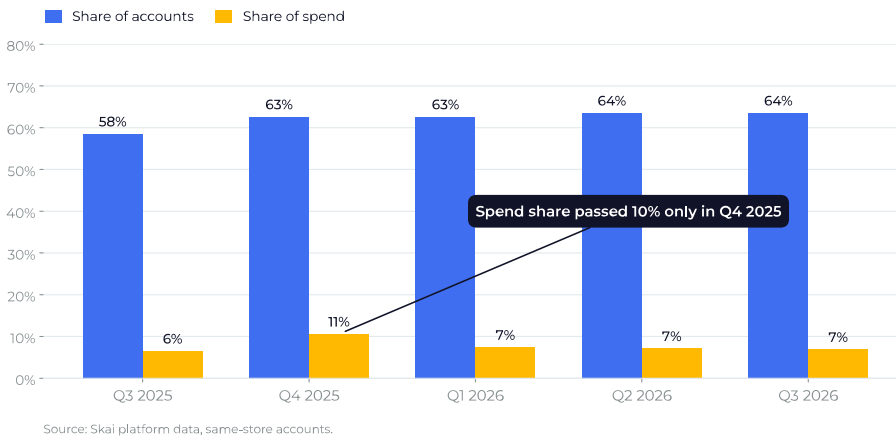
Recommended action for you: Set a max-CPC ceiling per campaign from your conversion rate, value per conversion, and target ROAS.

Performance Max now being used by 2/3rds of accounts

Performance Max runs in 64% of search accounts and takes about 7% of paid search spend, unchanged for three quarters. Its one big jump came in Q4 2025, when spend share passed 10% during holiday shopping.

Performance Max: in 64% of accounts, about 7% of spend, with one seasonal jump

Share of Skai search accounts using PMax vs its share of paid search spend



PMax behaves like a seasonal retail tool: broad adoption, thin share, and a spike when Shopping demand peaks. Expect the same this Q4, and plan for it to revert in Q1, which is important for anyone comparing January to December. Google's channel reporting now shows where PMax dollars land. Use it to compare PMax cost per conversion against standard Shopping and Search on the same products, so the Q4 spike is a decision you made.

Recommended action for you: Compare PMax cost per conversion against standard Shopping and Search on matched products before Cyber 5.

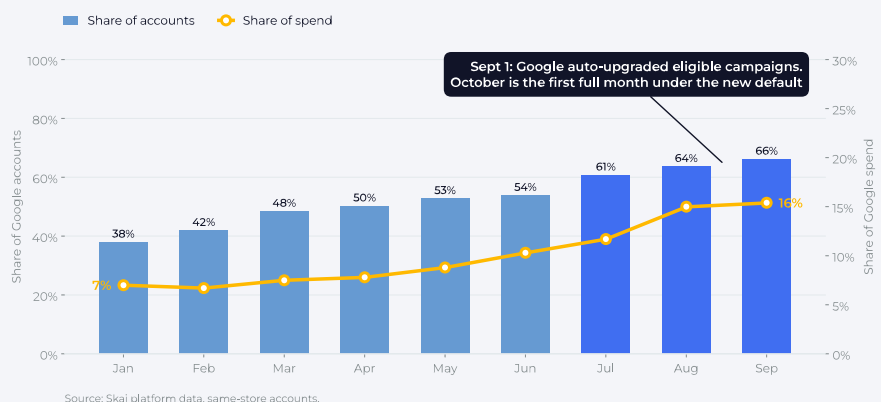
AI Max is now clearly the big mover

AI Max adoption rose from 38% of Google accounts in January to 66% in September, and its share of Google spend rose from 7% to 16%. Advertisers are putting more money behind it in each account, and Google's September 1 auto-upgrade of broad-match campaigns made it the default for many.

October is the first full month under the new default, which makes it the measurement month. If you have not already exported September's search-term and asset reports as a baseline, do it now; keep brand exclusions on; and track cost per conversion through October against September. The auto-upgrade turns on search-term matching by default and, for campaigns with automated assets, text customization too. Those are the two behaviors to watch in the search-term report.

AI Max went from 38% to 66% of Google accounts in nine months

Share of Skai Google accounts using AI Max and its share of Google spend, Jan to Sep 2026



Recommended action for you: Export September search-term and asset reports as the AI Max baseline; track October cost per conversion against it.



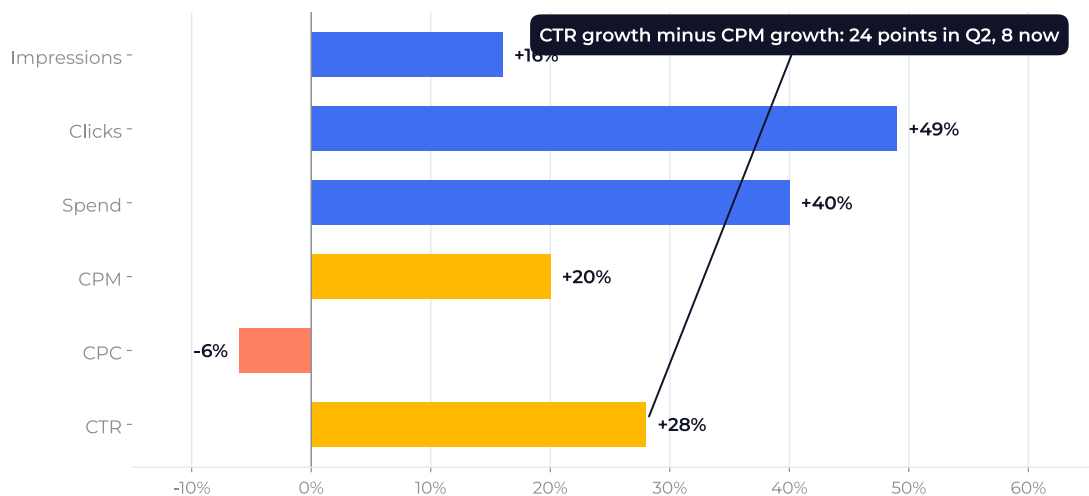
Paid social trends

Paid social grew fastest of the three channels this quarter, and it also saw the first real price pressure in years. Spend grew 40%, CPMs rose 20%, and industry detail shows the inflation is platform-wide, which changes how Q1 social budgets should be set.

Higher click-through rates, yet higher prices

Paid social Q3 2026: CTR +28% absorbed a 20% rise in CPM

Year-over-year change, Q3 2026 vs Q3 2025



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Social spend grew 40% year-over-year and CPMs rose 20%, up from +9% last quarter. Clicks still grew 49% because CTR jumped 28%, so CPC fell 6%. The cushion is thinner: CTR growth beat CPM inflation by 24 points last quarter and by 8 this quarter.

Watch CPM and CTR as a pair. When CPM climbs faster than CTR, CPC rises, and at the current rate of convergence that crossover is a quarter or two away for the average account. New creative lifts CTR fastest, so the lever is refresh cadence. For Q4, that means a creative bank deep enough to rotate weekly through Cyber 5; for Q1, it means building the production cadence that keeps CTR ahead of a CPM line that is not going to fall back.

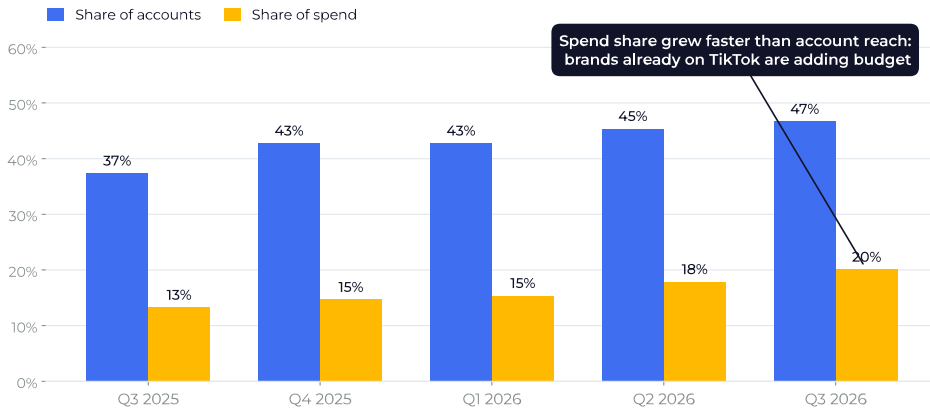
Recommended action for you: Track CTR growth minus CPM growth monthly; when it nears zero, increase creative refresh cadence before touching bids.

TikTok nearly doubled YoY

TikTok's share of social spend grew from 13% in Q3 2025 to 20% in Q3 2026, and account reach rose from 38% to 47%. Spend share grew faster than account reach.

TikTok's share of social spend went from 13% to 20% in a year

Share of Skai social accounts running TikTok vs TikTok's share of social spend



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

Brands already on TikTok are putting more money into it, which is the adoption pattern of a channel that is working. Size your own share by comparing conversions per dollar on TikTok against your core platform, and set the Q1 split from that ratio. If you are below 20% and your ratio is at or above parity, the market is telling you where the next test budget goes.

Recommended action for you: Compare conversions per dollar on TikTok against your core platform and set Q1 share from the ratio.

Social by industry

B2B Goods & Services stands out with CPMs up 132% and spend up 148%, which points to new buyers crowding the same audiences. Jobs & EDU paid 49% more per thousand impressions and held spend flat. Most other categories paid 5% to 23% more and still grew budgets, with CPG up 66% and Consumer Goods & Retail up 45%.

A CPM jump far past the platform trend usually means audience overlap with new entrants, and the fix is audience work: look at nearby segments, broaden where the algorithm can find cheaper equivalents, and let Advantage+ style automation explore. B2B's willingness to pay 132% more and still grow 148% says the channel is converting for that category; the cost is a competition signal, and the response is differentiation.

Social by industry: most categories paid 5% to 23% more per thousand and still grew

Year-over-year change in CPM (x) and spend (y) by industry, Q3 2026



Source: Skai platform data, same-store accounts.

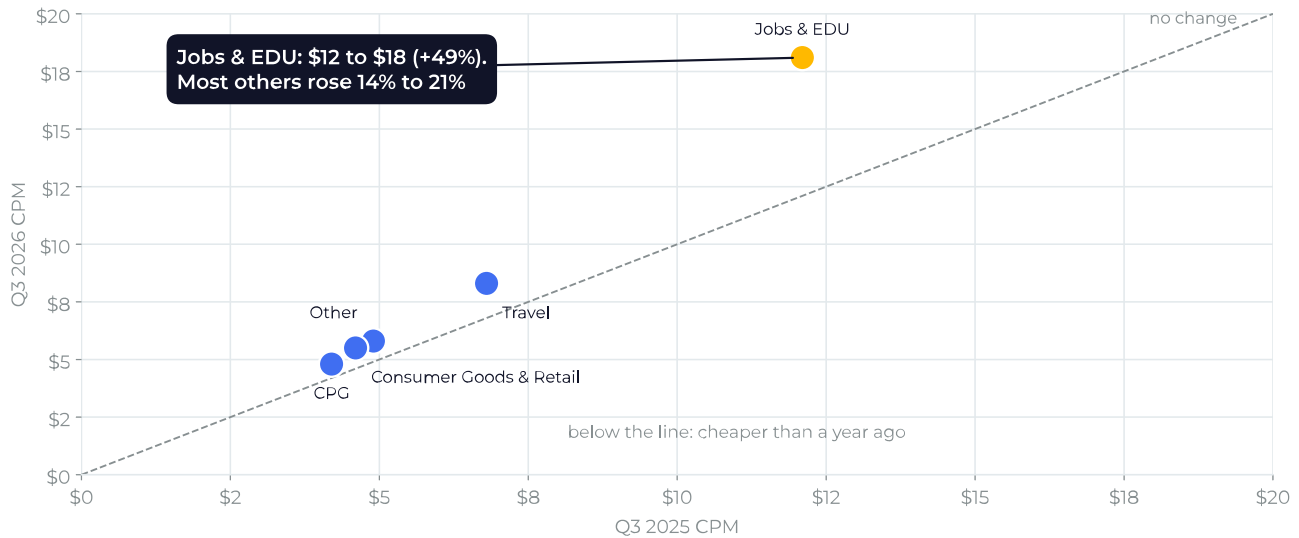
Recommended action for you: If your CPM rose far beyond the platform trend, check audience overlap with new entrants and test adjacent segments.

Social CPM by industry

CPMs rose in every category: about 14% to 21% for most, and about 49% for Jobs & EDU, from \$12 to \$18. The lift is similar enough across categories to read as platform-wide inflation, in line with Meta's reported 12% rise in average price per ad.

Social CPM by industry: a uniform rise that looks platform-wide

Q3 2025 CPM (x) vs Q3 2026 CPM (y)



Platform-wide inflation does not reset in January. Plan on every social impression costing 15% to 20% more than it did a year ago, and build Q1 budgets on that assumption. Relevance is how you beat it, because the auction rewards ads people engage with, and that is the same creative cadence argument from the CTR chart, now with a budget number attached.

Recommended action for you: Build Q1 social budgets on CPMs 15% to 20% above last year; do not plan on a January reset.





Agentic marketing updates

AI is quickly moving from an efficiency tool that helps marketers move faster to a true partner for marketers to improve every part of the campaign lifecycle.

IAB Tech Lab set the rules for agents that buy media

On September 22, IAB Tech Lab released AAMP 3.0, adding OpenProposal, a standard for the steps between an RFP and a signed buy. Sellers publish ad packages in an agent-readable format; buyer agents discover them, compare them to a brief, and negotiate terms. It connects to AdCOM, OpenDirect, and the Deals API, so DSPs and SSPs keep their current setups. WPP Media and PMG back it, and public comment runs through October 22.

An agent can compare far more publishers against a brief than any planner can, and once the proposal layer is standard, the comparison becomes routine. The question for your agency and your platforms is how and when they will adopt it, and the question for your own team is what a brief has to contain for an agent to act on it. Writing that brief template is a Q1 task with no dependency on anyone else's roadmap.

Marketers are becoming builders

A survey of 302 SaaS marketers found that 41% say *vibe coding* is widely used or built into team workflows, and 57% started less than a year ago. They build workflow automations (57%), integrations (50%), data pipelines (48%), and internal tools (45%); only 17% build customer-facing apps. Three-quarters use MCP for some integrations. Skills are the top barrier (44%), yet only 21% require training. Teams that do are more confident (52% versus 44%) and see fast ROI more often (41% versus 30%). Marketing-led rollouts saw fast ROI 47% of the time; vendor-led rollouts, 14%.

How you roll it out matters more than which tool you pick. The practical implication for a media team is that the first agentic project should be an internal one, led from marketing ops, with training written into the guardrails from the start. Reporting automation and change-log review are the two use cases with the shortest path to value, and both produce the baselines the rest of this report asks for.



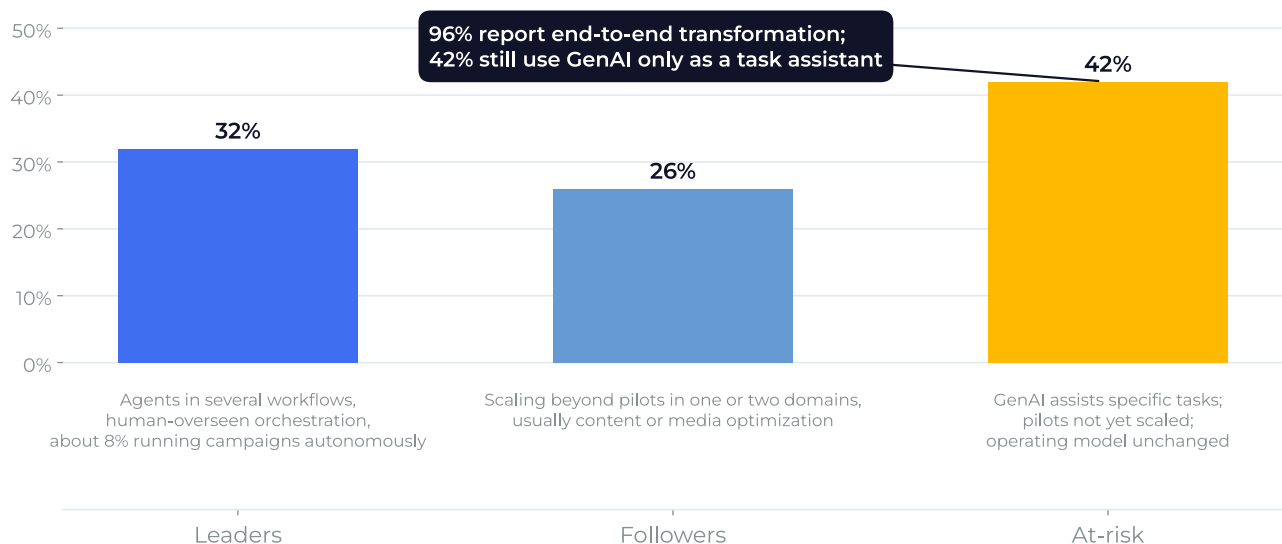
Boston Consulting Group report: the money and the mandate are both climbing

BCG's 2026 survey of 300 CMOs found 96% reporting significant end-to-end AI transformation of their function, while 42% admit they still use GenAI only as an assistant for individual tasks. Grouped by how AI is actually deployed, 32% are leaders running agents across several workflows with human-overseen orchestration, 26% are followers scaling beyond pilots in one or two domains, and 42% are at risk, with pilots that have not scaled and an operating model that has not changed.

Spending is rising: 43% now invest more than \$15 million in marketing AI, up from 28%, and 94% say CEO expectations of marketing have risen significantly in two years. About half say marketing itself now leads AI investment decisions.

Most CMOs sit between ambition and deployment

BCG CMO Survey 2026, 300 CMOs grouped by how AI is actually deployed across marketing



Source: BCG, Moving the Agentic Marketing Transformation from Illusion to Reality, June 2026.

Martech (44%) and data (42%) are the top AI spending priorities, up 11 and 12 points. BCG describes a four-layer stack: data, a brand intelligence layer that encodes the brand's rules and context, an agentic layer for multi-agent orchestration, and a single interface for marketers. The brand layer is what turns a general copilot into your company's agent. About 80% of CMOs are funding AI training, and responsible-AI training grew fastest, up 10 points; only the 20% furthest along have rebuilt teams around customers instead of channels. Implementation, privacy, copyright, and brand voice top the risk list at 64% to 65%.

Taken together with Skai's own readiness research, in which 79% of 332 paid media practitioners scored below the Building tier and the least-ready dimensions were use cases, operating model, and creative assets, the diagnosis is consistent. Willingness is ahead of capability, and the capability that is missing is organizational: who owns the agent, what it is allowed to change, and how the result is measured.

Channel priorities for the agentic era



Retail media: agents win where media, sales, and shelf data connect

Ninety-one percent of B2C CMOs say AI answers that skip the click are already reshaping the funnel, and retail is where that choice happens first. It is also the one channel with sales and inventory data next to the ad data, which is what an agent needs to act well.

→ **Retail Media Priorities:** connect sales and inventory feeds to the bidding layer; give agents bid and budget authority inside guardrails on Sponsored Products first; use them to keep product data complete and current, since that is what AI shopping surfaces read; and measure on total-account lift so DSP's contribution is visible.



Paid search: bidding is already automated, the next gain is orchestration

Search is where many agent pilots started. BCG's at-risk tier saw gains in bidding and has not scaled them, while 90% of CMOs say GenAI is changing how people find brands.

→ **Paid Search Priorities:** let agents run query analysis and negative-keyword harvesting at scale; use them to flag mismatches between ad copy and landing page; coordinate search with retail media and social from one brief so budgets move between channels on evidence; and keep the October AI Max baseline as the first controlled comparison.



Social: more creative output needs more brand control

Creative is where agents scale fastest, and BCG's CMOs name the risks: protecting brand voice (64%) and too much content (60%). With CPMs up 20%, extra volume only pays if it is relevant.

→ **Social Advertising Priorities:** set the brand layer before the volume (Meta's Branding section is the minimum); use agents to generate and test variants against a CTR floor; keep audience decisions human-approved until the agent has a track record; and tie creative refresh cadence to the CTR-minus-CPM number from the social section.



Looking ahead: Q4 adjustments and the Q1 reset

Budgets are set. What is still open is the shape of spend inside them, the mix across formats, and the baselines you will need in January. The calendar comes first, then the adjustments you can still make, then the Q1 traps and resets.

The Q4 marketing calendar



OCTOBER 6 TO 7

Prime Big Deal Days:

already run. Mine the results for winning products and audiences, and use them to set Cyber 5 bids.



OCTOBER 28

The 30-day Cyber 5 ramp begins. Shape it like the September build.



OCTOBER 31

Halloween: a break between big events. Keep always-on budgets live so you do not go dark before November.



DECEMBER 14

Green Monday and shipping

cutoffs: late shoppers meet last-order deadlines. Check cutoffs by carrier and put delivery dates in your ads.



NOVEMBER 26 TO 30

Cyber 5: Thanksgiving through Cyber Monday. Plan for Thanksgiving-night mobile, Black Friday depth, and Cyber Monday's bottom-funnel peak.



NOVEMBER 11

Singles Day: a global sale that can pull demand ahead of Black Friday; most useful for cross-border and marketplace brands.



DECEMBER 19

Super Saturday into Christmas:

lead with in-stock and fast delivery, and bid only on items that can arrive in time.



DECEMBER 26 INTO EARLY JANUARY

Returns and gift cards:

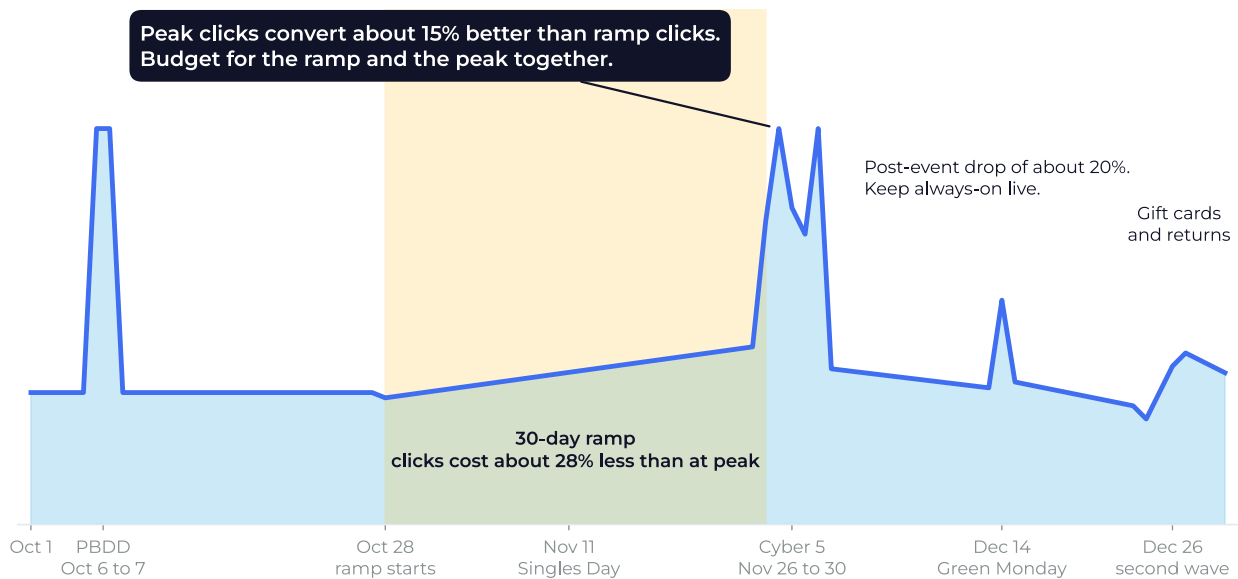
a second wave of buying. Keep budgets live for those shoppers.

The Q4 pacing shape

The chart below turns the Prime Big Deal Days pattern into a Q4 shape. The ramp starts October 28 at ramp economics (clicks about 28% cheaper than peak), Cyber 5 runs at the peak multiplier with better conversion, the post-event week drops about 20%, Green Monday gives a smaller spike, and the gift-card wave starts December 26.

The Q4 pacing shape: start the Cyber 5 ramp on October 28

Illustrative daily spend shape, Oct 1 to Dec 31, built from the Prime Big Deal Days pattern



Illustrative shape. Multipliers from Skai Prime Big Deal Days 2026 analysis; dates from the 2026 retail calendar.

Reshaping the curve inside a fixed budget means taking dollars from the quiet mid-November days most plans overfund and from the post-Cyber-Monday week most plans forget to cut, and putting them into the ramp and the December 26 wave. None of that requires new budget. It requires a pacing plan with dates on it, and the dates are above.



What to adjust in Q4

- Start the Cyber 5 ramp on October 28 and weight it like September: a steady build, with the final week 15% to 20% above the first three.
- Set the DSP versus Sponsored Products mix on stage-specific cost per outcome. DSP's price premium is gone, so the old rationing rule no longer applies.
- Put October's winning products and audiences at the front of the Cyber 5 plan, with DSP building audiences and Sponsored Brands lifting basket size.
- Refresh social creative weekly through Cyber 5. CTR is the only thing standing between a 20% CPM rise and a CPC rise.
- Hold search budget to converting, high-intent terms and set a max-CPC ceiling per campaign before the auction heats up.
- Track October cost per conversion against the September AI Max baseline, and decide by mid-November whether the default needs changing.
- Keep always-on budgets live through Halloween and the post-event troughs; the efficient days are the quiet ones.



Plans for Q1

- 1 Rebuild forecasts on the inputs that moved consistently:**
clicks and conversion rate for retail media, value per click for search, conversions and sales for social.
- 2 Run the matched-item Amazon versus Walmart test**
and the Walmart Sponsored Brands budget-share test while volumes are manageable and nothing is riding on the outcome.
- 3 Set up incrementality measurement before Q2 budgets scale,**
including a way to see DSP's effect on Sponsored Products and branded search.
- 4 Write the agent brief template and the guardrails:**
which agent can read what, which can write what, who approves, and what cost-per-conversion threshold triggers a pause.
- 5 Pick one internal agentic project,**
with training in the guardrails: reporting automation or change-log review are the shortest paths to value.
- 6 Make product data agent-ready:**
complete attributes, accurate pricing and availability, and structured content that an AI shopping surface or a sponsored agent can sell from.



Conclusion

Q3 2026 rewarded advertisers who knew what sat in last year's base and who kept building through the quiet weeks. The five takeaways again, each with the adjustment or reset attached.



Don't be fooled by the numbers; retail media did not slow down; the calendar changed.

While on paper Amazon Ads spend declined 4% year-over-year from Q3 2025, the real reason behind it was that Prime Day moved from Q3 (July) to Q2 (June) in 2026.



DSP is now more of the value choice than ever.

Set the Amazon format mix on cost per outcome by stage, and read DSP on total-account lift.



Search repricing is cooling after the impact of AI Overviews.

And remember, October is when all campaigns got the AI Max push. Check your programs very closely.



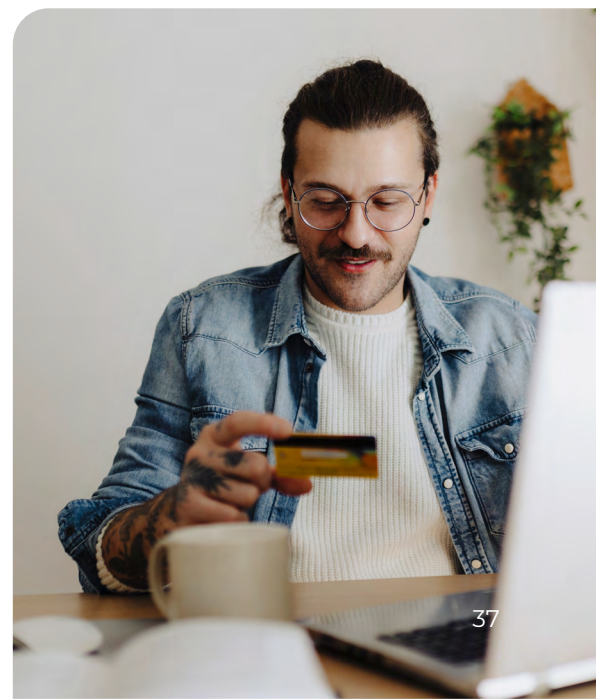
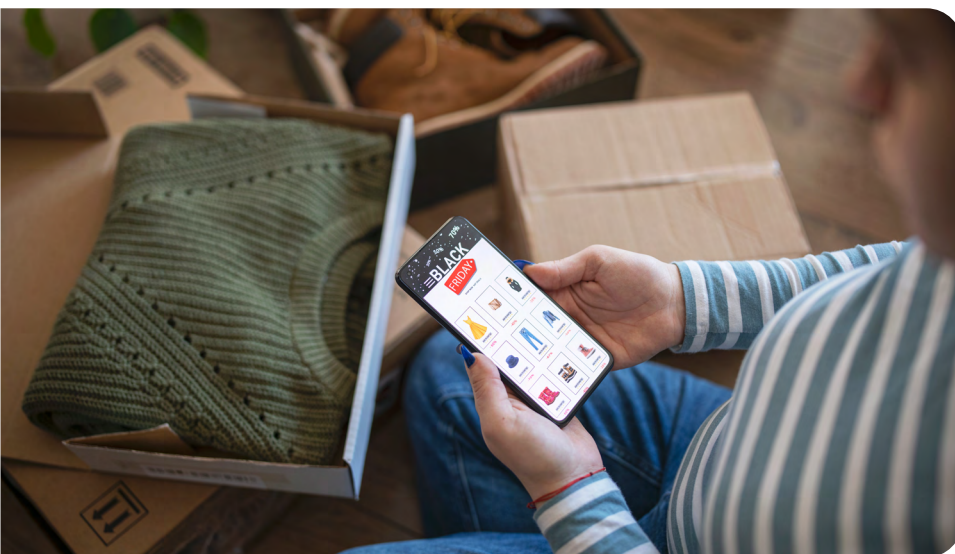
Social is going gangbusters with TikTok surging.

Social marketers, just keep doing whatever you're doing! It's obviously working.



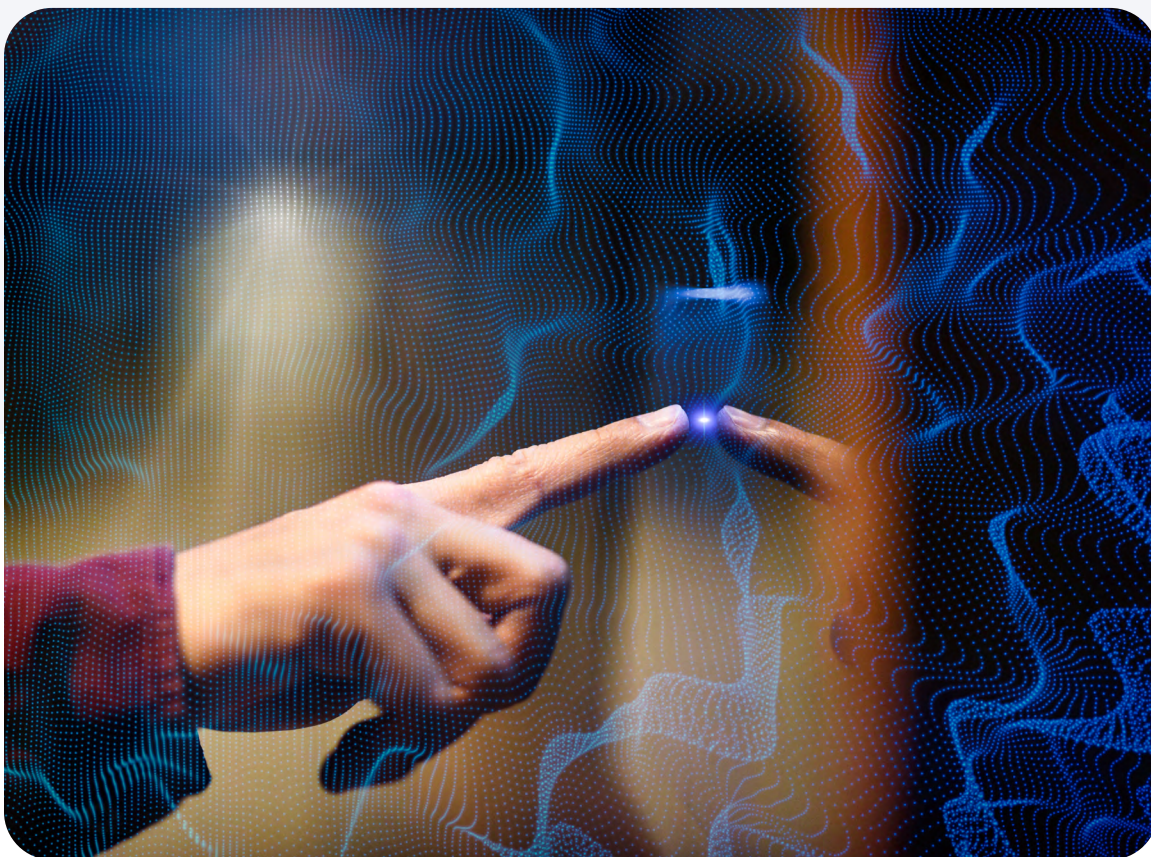
The ramp is part of the event.

Start the Cyber 5 build on October 28, budget the ramp and the peak as one window, and keep always-on live through the troughs.





Methodology



The findings in this report are based on aggregated, anonymized data from Skai's managed platform, drawn from a population of nearly 1 trillion impressions, 10 billion clicks, and \$10 billion in advertising spend across five quarters spanning multiple countries and industry categories. Unless otherwise noted, year-over-year comparisons include only advertisers with 15 consecutive months of spending, which removes the distortion that account turnover would otherwise introduce. Additional outliers have been removed where necessary. Indexed charts show the shape of change relative to a base period rather than absolute dollar values. This analysis is based on spending from Skai clients only and should not be interpreted as a fully accurate representation of channel or individual publisher performance. Third-party figures, including Prime Big Deal Days consumer spending and the survey research cited in the agentic section, are attributed to their original sources and used as context alongside Skai's proprietary data.

About Skai

Skai is the agent-native omnichannel marketing platform helping brands and agencies connect data, intelligence, and execution to drive better performance. Built on an open data and intelligence foundation, Skai enables marketers to run omnichannel media, build and govern AI agents, connect their own agents via MCP, and make fragmented marketing data agent-ready.

Trusted by over 8,200 brands and agencies, such as PepsiCo, Opella, Mars, Publicis, Tinuiti, and WPP, Skai integrates with more than 300 publishers and retail media networks, including Amazon Ads, Walmart Connect, Epsilon, Google, Microsoft, Meta, and TikTok, and is headquartered in San Francisco with nine international offices.