TECHMACHAW

FREE PLAYBOOK

The Media Planning Playbook Every Beginner Needs

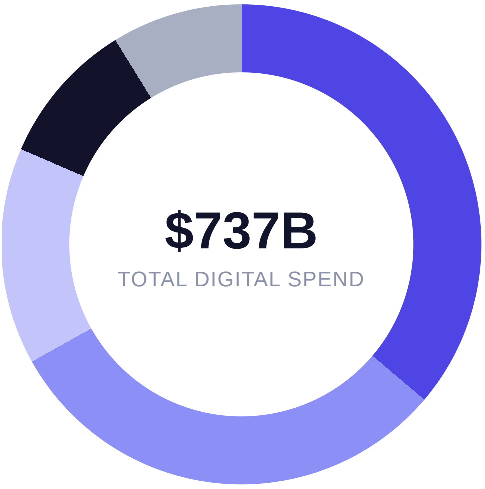
The 2026 spend data, a plain-English guide to what every channel actually is, and the checklist senior stakeholders expect before any budget gets approved. Built for planners, marketers, and creators who want the money side of digital to finally make sense.

8-minute read · 7 pages

SECTION 1

Where the money is actually going in 2026

Every dollar of digital ad spend lands in one of five buckets. Here's how the pie actually splits — not how most beginners assume it splits.



Search	**36.2%**
Social	**30.7%**
Display / Programmatic	**14.6%**
Video / CTV	**9.7%**
Retail Media	**8.4%**

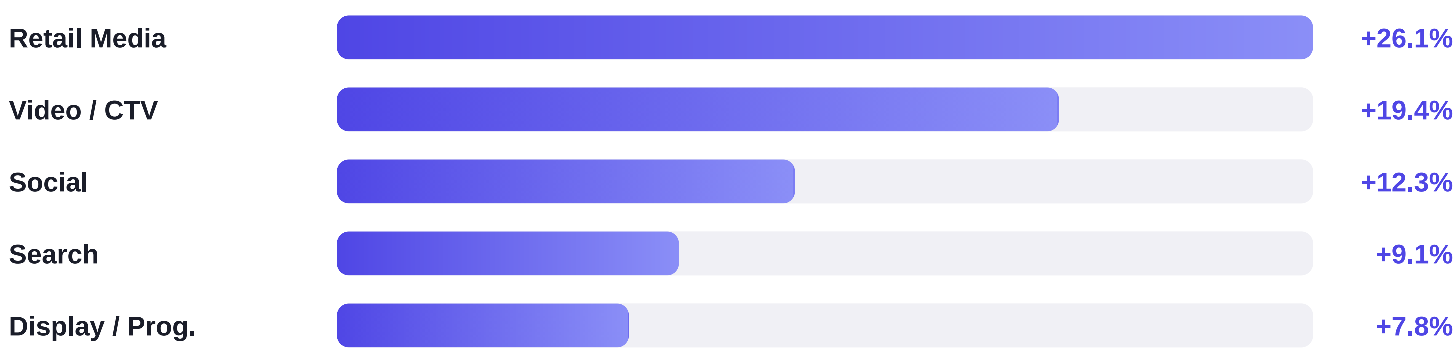
Search and social still own two-thirds of the pie. But size isn't the same as opportunity — the next page shows you where the pie is actually *growing*, which is a different story entirely.

SECTION 1, CONTINUED

The full picture: size vs. growth

The biggest channels aren't the fastest-growing ones. Knowing the difference is what separates a planner who chases trends from one who spots them early.

CHANNEL	GLOBAL SPEND	SHARE	YOY GROWTH
Search	$268B	36.2%	+9.1%
Social	$227B	30.7%	+12.3%
Display / Programmatic	$108B	14.6%	+7.8%
Video / CTV	$72B	9.7%	**+19.4%**
Retail Media	$62B	8.4%	**+26.1%**



SECTION 2

The channel cheat sheet: what each one actually is

Nobody hands new planners a glossary. Here's the one-paragraph version of every channel in the table above.

S

Search

Ads shown alongside search engine results (Google, Bing), targeted by keyword and intent. High intent, high cost — you're paying to reach people already looking for something specific.

So

Social

Ads inside platforms like Meta, TikTok, and LinkedIn, targeted by audience interest and behavior rather than intent. Best for discovery — reaching people before they know they want something.

D

Display / Programmatic

Banner and native ads bought automatically across websites and apps via ad exchanges, using real-time bidding. Cheap reach at scale, but the channel most exposed to fraud and low-quality placements.

V

Video / CTV

Video ads on streaming TV (Connected TV) and online video platforms. Combines the storytelling of traditional TV with the targeting and measurement of digital — which is exactly why it's growing fast.

R

Retail Media

Ads sold directly on a retailer's own platform — think sponsored listings on Amazon, Walmart Connect, or Target Roundel — targeted using that retailer's first-party purchase data, right at the point of purchase.

2–3x

Retail media and CTV are growing two to three times faster than the search and social channels most new planners default to first.

$84B

Lost to ad fraud every year (11.4% of global spend), with CTV fraud running as high as 18%. Verification is part of the plan, not an afterthought.

SECTION 3

The four questions every plan must answer

CMOs don't remember planners who knew the most platforms. They remember planners who never made them ask a question twice.

1 What outcome are we buying?

Not impressions. Not clicks. The business result the spend is meant to move, stated in one line.

2 What happens if it doesn't work?

A stated threshold for when you pause, shift, or kill a line item — decided before launch, not after the budget is spent.

3 Who is accountable for which number?

Vague ownership is how underperformance survives for months. Specific ownership is how it gets caught in week two.

4 What does this cost against what it returns?

Not vanity metrics. The actual return, stated in terms the finance side of the business already uses.

SECTION 4

Run this before any plan leaves your desk

If it survives this list, it's ready for a room with senior stakeholders in it.

- ☐ **Every line item has a stated reason** it's in the plan — not just a budget number.
- ☐ **Every line item has a "pause or shift" threshold,** decided before launch.
- ☐ **The plan states the business outcome first,** and the channels second.
- ☐ **Someone specific owns each number,** by name.
- ☐ **You can explain the whole plan out loud** in under two minutes, without reading from it.

THE MISTAKE TO AVOID

New planners add channels because it feels thorough. Before adding one, finish this sentence: ***"This channel exists because it does ___ better than every other option we considered."*** If you can't, cut it.

QUICK REFERENCE

Frequently asked questions

What exactly is retail media?

Advertising sold directly on a retailer's own site or app — sponsored product listings on Amazon, for example — targeted using that retailer's first-party shopper data. It's the fastest-growing channel in this guide because it reaches people at the moment they're already buying.

What KPIs matter most right now?

Beyond impressions and clicks: treat retail media and CTV as priority KPIs since they're the fastest-growing channels in 2026. Track return against business outcomes, not vanity metrics.

How is AI changing the planner's job?

AI is compressing the manual work — building variants, first-pass optimization, drafting plan structures. It's not replacing judgment. Use the time it saves to think harder about strategy.

What separates a planner from a media buyer?

A buyer sets a budget. A planner defends the decision with numbers: why this channel, this audience, this amount — and not something else.

This playbook is the short version. Whether you plan media for a living, create content for a brand, or just want to understand where ad money actually goes, the TechMachaw newsletter covers all of it — weekly, in plain English. Read the full breakdown on the blog and stay subscribed for what's next.

techmachaw.com →