

ECI Media Management's

Top 10

insights into

retail media as it

reaches maturity

Retail media in its modern form has existed since the 2010s, when Amazon and other large retailers began to formalize their ad offerings built around shopper data. But it was the pandemic-era boom in ecommerce that truly accelerated the channel's rise, propelling it from a niche opportunity to a mainstream priority. Since then, it has matured rapidly and, as we enter the second half of the 2020s, it is firmly established as one of the fastest-growing areas of online advertising – and one of the most scrutinized.

It is interesting to frame the rapid rise of retail media as a third wave in the evolution of online advertising, following the trajectory of first search and then content. Its exponential growth is being driven by its power to engage consumers directly at the point of purchase – when they are already in a 'buying' mindset.

In this white paper, our media performance experts distill their in-depth understanding of this rapidly growing sector into ten must-know points to consider for your retail media investment strategies in 2026 and beyond.

1. Increased investment in retail media means careful allocation decision-making

Retail media is one of the most dynamic channels in the marketing landscape. It is estimated that retail media will account for 20% of digital ad spend in the US in 2025; by 2028, it is expected to account for almost a quarter of all US media spend (eMarketer). Interestingly, also by 2028, retail media CTV investment will represent almost 22% of CTV ad spending overall (eMarketer).

The evolution in retail media is being driven by continual technological advancements and the strategic imperative of first-party data in an era where data regulations are increasingly on the minds of marketers.

With a channel that promises to deliver so much, it can be tempting to over-invest; while it's important to invest adequately, overspend could lead to waste and limited or duplicated reach.

2. Retail media is evolving into a full-funnel channel; investment needs to reflect objectives

Retail media has typically taken the form of onsite ads, that is, display placements on a retailer's own properties targeting shoppers at the point of purchase. Its proximity to the point of purchase is key to the strength and success of retail media, but the finite nature of onsite inventory has prompted retailers to leverage their rich first-party data to deliver campaigns outside their own platforms that can be precisely targeted and personalized, on channels not covered by onsite such as display, video, CTV, social and audio. While these channels may traditionally have been used to target the top of the funnel, the use of first-

party data makes them effective further down the funnel as well. As a result, advertisers are investing more heavily in retail media to support mid- and upper-funnel objectives, not just direct sales. For retail media networks, this shift to targeting branding budgets is a deliberate strategy to access a higher share of the media investment pie.

Onsite investments currently dominate retail media strategies – only about 20% of retail ad spend is currently spent on offsite investments. However, the offsite share will continue to grow as retailers develop capabilities to extend reach and harness more engaging formats through offsite placements.

3. The expansion into offsite has unleashed omnichannel opportunities; advertisers must consider which formats will drive attention whilst minimizing waste

Of course, retail media has its roots in onsite search and in display ads, but the real opportunity for advertisers lies in combining these assets with offsite activations that span CTV, display, video, social, audio, DOOH and even traditional OOH, using the retailer's first-party data as the connective tissue. This allows the planning, targeting and measurement of campaigns to happen seamlessly across channels. In this way, retail media should be viewed not as a standalone media channel, but as an 'enabler' of integrated omnichannel media investment strategies.

Care should be taken, however. Without deduplicated reach and frequency controls, advertisers risk wasted spend and consumer fatigue. Retail media should be integrated into broader cross-channel measurement frameworks.

4. In-store digital inventory presents the opportunity to invest in online and physical environments as part of a wider retail media strategy

Retailers are rapidly extending their media networks into their physical stores through digital shelf displays, in-aisle screens, 'smart carts' and audio channels. These formats promise incremental reach and the ability to influence purchase decisions at the very last mile of the in-store shopper journey. A growing number of networks with significant physical presence, including Walmart and Carrefour, are bundling in-store digital inventory with onsite and offsite activations. This is a blind spot for Amazon; without the large-scale store footprint of its nearest competitors, it has a limited ability to compete in this specific space, despite its dominance in onsite and offsite retail media.

However, those retailers with a physical presence are still developing audience measurement standards – and these are often inconsistent with one another. There is clearly a significant opportunity here for advertisers, but they should approach it in the same way they would any online medium. Until there are consistent standards, in-store retail media needs to be carefully tested, benchmarked and analyzed against broader objectives. Advertisers be aware that retailers may push for higher spend without clear ROI – and may even tie investment levels to access to premium shelf space.



5. The integration of onsite and offsite strategies is essential and highlights the need for data ownership

Sustained success in the retail media landscape hinges on developing integrated strategies that thoughtfully leverage both onsite and offsite capabilities to create a flywheel effect. Offsite ads can significantly increase clicks on onsite ads, leading to more sales which in turn generate a richer pool of first-party data – which, if advertisers are given proper access and ownership, can drive their own first-party data assets. Evidence suggests that shoppers exposed to both onsite and offsite ads are five times more likely to convert on the retailer's site. An integrated strategy combining offsite and onsite improves performance across the funnel but also enables advertisers to measure consistently and hold the retail media networks accountable.

6. Amazon's US dominance contrasts with Europe's more fragmented landscape

Amazon is still by far the dominant retail media network, attracting three-quarters of US retail media ad spend and around 40% of the global market; its retail media ad revenue is set to hit \$60 billion this year. It offers sophisticated targeting, analytics and offsite activation, while the scale of its shopper data and its integration with its DSP sets the industry benchmark. However, other retailers are working hard to close the gap, with many leveraging their physical store presence to offer in-store digital formats. Walmart, Amazon's closest competitor in the US (although a distant second with a 7% of the retail media market), has its Walmart Connect platform, which offers end-to-end capabilities, including sponsored search, onsite display and in-store digital placements. The latter is being extended to include screens, in-store audio and physical activations.

In the US, with Amazon as such a dominant force, advertisers can make a real difference in creating a more vibrant marketplace by supporting smaller but still significant players such as Walmart and Target. In Europe, Amazon is less dominant, creating a different dynamic: a fragmented landscape of smaller national and regional retailers, of which Carrefour is a key player. This lack of scale can pose a challenge for advertisers seeking consistency in their investments across the region, making benchmarking and tailored approaches to investment even more crucial.

7. Advertisers should ensure they apply normal quality standards

The opportunities presented by retail media are varied and exciting, but advertisers should not be tempted to invest without applying the same quality standards they would to other channels, and ensuring secure third-party tracking and independent verification wherever possible. The importance of safeguarding viewability and brand safety, and maintaining contextual relevance remains, otherwise wasted spend and reduced marketing performance become a real risk.



8. A KPI framework combining media and business KPIs is crucial

KPIs for onsite retail media typically reflect its lower-funnel status, focusing on conversion and business outcomes such as sales, conversion rate and average order value. Offsite activations, by contrast, are measured with media KPIs including reach, frequency, delivery, completion rates, and attention metrics linked to recall and attitudinal impact. Advertisers should take a holistic approach across all channels, including measurement. With offsite retail media often carrying a higher CPM than equivalent programmatic buys, it's important to benchmark cost and effectiveness properly versus alternatives such as social, display and CTV.

9. Measurement standards are still catching up

Progress has been made by industry bodies such as the IAB in developing frameworks for retail media measurement, providing guidance on impressions, viewability and transparency. However, adoption of these frameworks by retail networks has not been consistent and they often use their own definitions and methodologies. This lack of uniformity makes benchmarking performance across networks extremely difficult. Advertisers should therefore push for alignment to recognized standards while also establishing internal baselines, ensuring they can compare results fairly, track progress over time and avoid over-reliance on the retailers' self-reported metrics.

10. Transparency and trust must be prioritized

The retail media ecosystem remains fragmented and all-too-frequently opaque. Concerns remain around placement quality: offsite programmatic retail media has faced scrutiny for appearing on 'Made for Advertising' (MFA) sites - low-quality, click-bait environments that deliver impressions but little genuine value. As the retail media landscape matures, it becomes increasingly important to insist on transparency – in fees, data, targeting and reporting. The fact that many advertisers are now offering self-service tools is a positive sign, as it provides advertisers with greater visibility and control over their investments.

What this means for marketers

The retail media landscape is maturing quickly and is attracting a growing share of advertising budgets. This means that the challenge has moved on from *whether* to invest to *how* to ensure those investments are efficient, transparent and comparable. Benchmarking outcomes, developing a holistic KPI framework and regular media performance audits will ensure that every ad dollar invested in retail media works hard for your brand and delivers maximum value.

About ECI

ECI: HIGHER MEDIA VALUE

Technology is transforming the media landscape at an unprecedented pace. But in the right hands, change can be a force for good. ECI, the market's fastest growing global media management company, leverages these changes to help you drive higher media value from your advertising investment.

A modern, data-led approach

Ever since our formation we have championed a modern approach to media and financial auditing. As pioneers in the field of online auditing, we include sophisticated analysis of programmatic activity in our audit model, and we pride ourselves on a forensic, fact-based approach which harnesses the power of our world-class talent and proprietary technology. Along with our innovative benchmarking capabilities, we are confident in our ability to empower our clients to drive higher media value and media-led impact on business performance.

Cutting-edge services

Capitalizing on today's dynamic, fast-paced media landscape to drive higher

media value requires data-driven decision-making, global experience and a deep understanding of the latest technologies. At ECI we are proud to be able to offer these and so much more. Our promise to our clients is that we will deliver actionable insights on their media investments in a timely fashion, and that we will always balance cost and quality KPIs to drive maximum media impact and value. We partner with advertisers to support their agency pitches and contract negotiations, identifying fee models that cultivate transparent, productive partnerships and deliver stronger outcomes.

Global experience, local expertise

We are proud of our client portfolio, which contains some of the world's largest and leading advertisers. Our network of owned offices and leading affiliates supports them where they need us, across the Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific. We offer them high-level media intelligence and rigorous benchmarking and, ultimately, the insight, experience and savvy to ensure that their advertising investment and agency relationships drive higher media value.

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