



# What's Working in 2026

The most effective strategies for running high-performing campaigns on Meta and Google -- packed with benchmarks, frameworks, and step-by-step tactics for 2026.

## Meta + Google

Platforms covered

## 35+

Proven tactics

## 2026

Current benchmarks

## Free

No cost

### What's inside:

- The 2026 Meta campaign structures beating the algorithm
- Google Search, Performance Max, and YouTube that scale
- Creative frameworks proven to drive lower CPAs
- Full-funnel attribution -- connecting spend to revenue
- Platform benchmarks so you know what good looks like
- A 90-day plan for scaling from \$5K to \$50K/month

### WHO THIS IS FOR

**Ecommerce brands:** spending \$5K-\$100K/month looking to improve ROAS

**Local service businesses:** using Google Search and Meta to generate leads at scale

**Marketing managers:** who want a clear framework for running both platforms

**Agency teams:** looking for updated 2026 benchmarks to share with clients

### CHAPTERS AT A GLANCE

#### META ADS

- Campaign Architecture
- Audience Strategy
- Creative Frameworks
- Scaling Systems

#### GOOGLE ADS

- Search Strategy 2026
- Performance Max
- YouTube Ads
- Google Shopping

#### UNIFIED

- Full-Funnel Strategy
- Attribution + MER
- 90-Day Launch Plan
- Benchmarks

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This playbook covers Meta and Google Ads in depth, then brings them together into a unified strategy. Each chapter is self-contained.

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INTRODUCTION

# Why 2026 Demands a Different Approach

The advertising landscape has shifted. Here is what changed and why it matters.

The advertisers who thrived in 2023 and 2024 are not automatically thriving in 2026. Meta's algorithm operates with less individual-level signal than ever thanks to iOS privacy changes, while Google has pushed automation to the point where manual control is no longer the fastest path to performance.

The result is a new operating environment where old playbooks have decayed. Granular interest targeting on Meta? Less effective. Tightly controlled exact-match keyword strategies on Google? Increasingly expensive. The advertisers winning in 2026 have made one fundamental shift: they have moved from controlling the algorithm to feeding it.

The single biggest shift in 2026: your job is no longer to tell the algorithm WHO to target. Your job is to give it the best inputs -- creative, landing pages, conversion signals -- and let it find the buyers.

## The 5 Biggest Platform Shifts in 2026

| What Changed               | Old Approach (Losing)              | New Approach (Winning)                |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Meta targeting signal loss | Granular interest stacks, LAL 1-2% | Broad + strong creative, Advantage+   |
| Google automation push     | Exact match, manual bids           | Smart bidding, broad match, PMax      |
| Attribution fragmentation  | Platform-reported ROAS as truth    | Blended MER, incrementality testing   |
| Creative saturation        | 1-2 static ads per campaign        | 3-5 variants, weekly refresh cadence  |
| Privacy and cookie loss    | Pixel-only tracking                | CAPI + server-side + first-party data |

73%

Of ad budget wasted when structure is wrong

3.2x

Avg ROAS lift after proper account rebuild

\$0.31

Avg Google Search CPC for local service terms

61%

Google conversions from non-brand keywords

## What Meta Does Better

Meta's strength is demand generation -- reaching people before they know they need your product. It is unmatched for building brand familiarity at scale, retargeting warm audiences, and driving impulse purchases in ecommerce. In 2026, Meta's Advantage+ products have become genuinely powerful, particularly Advantage+ Shopping for ecommerce.

## What Google Does Better

Google captures intent. When someone searches 'emergency plumber near me' or 'best CRM for small business', they have already raised their hand. Google Search is the highest-intent advertising channel that exists. For local services, high-ticket B2B, and categories with strong organic search volume, Google often delivers the highest-quality leads.

Budget Allocation Rule of Thumb

Start at 60% Meta / 40% Google. As Google Search finds its footing (typically 4-6 weeks), shift toward 50/50. At \$50K+/month, test 40% Meta / 60% Google -- Google's intent capture becomes more valuable at scale.

Full-Funnel Platform Role by Stage

| Funnel Stage         | Primary Platform      | Role                                     |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Awareness (Cold)     | Meta (Feed, Reels)    | Introduce brand, build familiarity       |
| Consideration (Warm) | Meta Retargeting      | Re-engage visitors, address objections   |
| Intent (Hot)         | Google Search         | Capture searches created by Meta spend   |
| Conversion           | Meta BOF + Google     | Final push: offer, urgency, specific CTA |
| Retention            | Meta Custom Audiences | Re-engage customers, cross-sell          |

META 01

Campaign Architecture That Wins in 2026

How to structure your Meta account so the algorithm has everything it needs.

The #1 structural mistake in 2026: too many ad sets, too little data per ad set. Meta's algorithm needs 50 conversion events per ad set per week to exit learning. Most accounts fragment budget across 10-20 ad sets and starve every one of signal.

The 3-Campaign Structure That Works

- Campaign 1 - TOF (Top of Funnel):** One campaign, 2-3 ad sets maximum, targeting cold audiences. Use Advantage+ Audience or broad targeting. CBO enabled. Objective: Conversions.
- Campaign 2 - MOF (Middle of Funnel):** One campaign targeting warm audiences -- 30-day website visitors, video viewers (50%+), page engagers. Retargeting-specific creative only.
- Campaign 3 - BOF (Bottom of Funnel):** One campaign targeting 7-day website visitors, add-to-cart abandoners, checkout abandoners. Maximum urgency messaging.

Advantage+ in 2026

**Advantage+ Shopping (ASC)** for ecommerce: If you have 30+ weekly purchases, test ASC with 20-30% of your ecommerce budget. It consistently outperforms manual campaigns when there is enough conversion data. Set up alongside manual campaigns, not replacing them.

**Advantage+ Audience** for lead gen: Enable at the ad set level for TOF campaigns. It expands your targeting beyond your defined audience to find similar converters. Requires strong creative to work -- if your creative is weak, it will find cheap non-converting clicks.

## 2026 Setup Checklist

### + Set up Conversions API (CAPI) before launching

Browser-based pixel alone loses 20-40% of conversion events to iOS blocking. CAPI sends server-side events directly to Meta. On Shopify this is a 10-minute setup.

### + Configure your 8 priority conversion events

Due to iOS14, Meta limits optimisation to 8 events per domain. Configure in priority order: Purchase -> Initiate Checkout -> Add to Cart -> Lead -> View Content -> Search -> Contact.

### + Set attribution to 7-day click, 1-day view

This is Meta's default and most accurate for most businesses. Do not use 1-day click attribution -- it dramatically undercounts conversions and causes Meta to underspend.

### + Install UTM parameters on every ad

UTMs on every ad URL allow GA4 to attribute sessions correctly. Without UTMs, cross-platform reporting is guesswork.

50

Min weekly events per ad set  
to exit learning

20%

Max budget increase limit per  
48hrs

7 days

Minimum before evaluating  
new campaigns

8

Priority conversion events per  
domain (iOS14 limit)

META 02

## Audience Strategy: Signals Over Segments

Why broad targeting plus strong creative now beats granular audience selection.

**The uncomfortable truth: in 2026, broad targeting -- no interests, no demographics beyond age/gender -- outperforms granular interest targeting in the majority of accounts we have tested. Meta's algorithm, fed with strong creative and clear conversion signals, finds the buyers. Your job is to give it the right inputs, not restrict its search.**

### The 2026 Audience Hierarchy

**Tier 1 -- Broad/Advantage+:** No interest targeting, age and gender only if clearly relevant. This is now the default starting point for TOF campaigns in most categories.

**Tier 2 -- Lookalike Audiences:** Still effective but seed quality is everything. Build LALs from: 180-day purchasers (strongest), 90-day leads, top 25% video viewers. Use 1-4% LALs -- anything above 5% is too diluted.

**Tier 3 -- Interest Stacking:** Reserve for niche categories where broad targeting genuinely struggles. Even here, test broad alongside interest-based.

Retargeting: Segment by Intent

- 7-day checkout abandoners:** Highest intent. Show the exact product with a specific reason to return -- urgency, social proof, or a small incentive. Converts at 4-8x your cold traffic rate.
- 30-day website visitors (non-converters):** Show benefits and social proof. They know you but have not committed. Address the most common objections directly in your creative.
- 90-day engagers:** Brand reminder content. Not hard sell -- keep them warm until they are ready.

The Exclusion Framework

- Apply exclusions rigorously to prevent audience overlap and wasted spend:
- Exclude existing customers from all cold traffic campaigns
  - Exclude 30-day purchasers from all retargeting campaigns
  - Exclude each retargeting tier from the tier above it

Audience Performance Benchmarks (2026)

| Audience Type             | Avg CTR | Avg CPM | Conv Rate | Best Use Case                  |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| Broad / Advantage+        | 1.4%    | \$12.80 | 2.1%      | TOF ecom, local services       |
| LAL 1-2% (purchasers)     | 1.6%    | \$14.20 | 2.8%      | TOF scale, proven products     |
| Interest-based stacks     | 1.1%    | \$15.40 | 1.7%      | Niche B2B, specialist services |
| 7-day checkout abandoners | 2.4%    | \$18.20 | 6.2%      | BOF ecommerce recovery         |
| 30-day site visitors      | 1.8%    | \$16.10 | 3.1%      | MOF nurture                    |
| Customer list (existing)  | 3.1%    | \$20.40 | 8.4%      | LTV upsell, reactivation       |

META 03

Creative That Converts: The 2026 Playbook

The formats, hooks, and frameworks driving the lowest CPAs on Meta right now.

Format Rankings: What's Working

- 1. Short-form video (9:16, 7-30 seconds):** Reels and Stories. Highest reach, lowest CPM. Native-looking content outperforms polished brand ads. Film on mobile, speak to camera, show the product or result within 3 seconds.
- 2. UGC-style content:** Content that looks like an organic post consistently outperforms branded creative in cold audiences. No logo animations, no polished studio shots.
- 3. Static single image:** Still effective for retargeting. Simpler, faster to test. Use for BOF campaigns where the audience already knows you.

## The Hook Framework: First 3 Seconds Win the Sale

Your ad competes with friends and creators for attention. The first 3 seconds determine whether the rest of your ad gets seen. The strongest hooks in 2026:

- Problem hook: "Still spending \$50/lead on Facebook?" -- names the exact pain
- Result hook: "We generated 47 leads in 7 days for this local HVAC company"
- Curiosity hook: "The reason your Meta ads are not scaling (it is not the budget)"
- Social proof hook: Open with a customer testimonial, on screen, unscripted
- Contrast hook: "Before Elevare: \$94 CPL. After: \$31 CPL. Same audience."

## The PAS Copy Framework

**Problem:** Open by naming the exact problem your ideal customer is experiencing right now. Be specific -- not 'struggling with ads' but 'spending \$3,000/month on Meta and getting a 1.2 ROAS.'

**Agitate:** Expand the problem. Make the pain feel real. 'Most agencies will tell you to spend more. The account structure is the problem -- and it costs you every single day.'

**Solution:** Present your offer as the specific relief. Clear, direct, outcome-specific.

## Creative Refresh: The Non-Negotiable Calendar

At \$10K/month: new creative every 3-4 weeks. At \$20K+/month: every 2-3 weeks. At \$50K+/month: weekly production is required. When any cold-audience ad set exceeds 3.0 frequency, creative is fatiguing. Have replacements ready before this point, not after.

**40-80%**

CTR lift from problem-led vs  
feature-led hook

**3x**

Video watch rate lift with  
strong hook

**4.8%**

Landing page CVR vs 0.6%  
homepage

**2.5s**

Target mobile load time for  
paid traffic landing pages

META 04

## Scaling Meta Spend Without Killing Performance

The system for growing from \$5K to \$50K/month without the ROAS crash.

### Vertical vs Horizontal Scaling

**Vertical scaling** (increasing budget on existing campaigns) works until it hits an audience ceiling -- typically when daily spend reaches 1.5-2% of your total audience size. Above this, frequency builds rapidly and CPA degrades.

**The 20% rule:** Never increase a campaign budget by more than 20% in a 48-hour window. Above this, Meta resets the learning phase, causing a CPA spike most advertisers panic over incorrectly.

**Horizontal scaling** is how you break through audience ceilings: new audiences, new creative angles, new placements, or platform expansion to Google. Always reserve 15-20% of total spend for horizontal testing.

## Protecting Performance at Scale

### + Set up automated rules as safety guardrails

Meta automated rules: pause ad sets where CPA exceeds 2x your target for 3 consecutive days; send email alert when ROAS drops below minimum; automatically increase budget by 15% when ROAS exceeds your scale target for 3 consecutive days.

### + Creative production must keep pace with spend

At \$30K/month spend, you need 4-6 new creative variants per week. Build a creative production system before you need it -- reactive production always lags behind fatigue.

### + Separate testing from scaling campaigns

Never test new audiences or creative in proven scaling campaigns. Set up dedicated test campaigns (\$30/day minimum, max 20% of total spend). Graduate winners only after 14 days of consistent performance above your target CPA.

### + Track MER, not just ROAS

MER (Marketing Efficiency Ratio) = Total Revenue / Total Ad Spend across all channels. This is your true north. Platform-reported ROAS becomes unreliable at scale due to attribution overlap.

**Scaling decision checklist:** Before increasing budget -- Is 7-day ROAS above target for 5+ days? Is learning phase complete (50+ weekly events)? Is frequency under 3.0 on cold audiences? Is creative production keeping pace? All YES: scale by 15%. Any NO: fix the constraint first.

GOOGLE 01

## Search Campaign Strategy for 2026

How to win on Google Search when broad match and smart bidding dominate.

**The biggest shift: broad match + Smart Bidding + strong landing pages now outperforms exact match + manual bidding for most accounts. But broad match without proper negative keywords is a budget incinerator. The setup matters enormously.**

### The 2026 Keyword Strategy

**Start with Exact Match** for your highest-intent keywords. Run for 4-6 weeks to establish a conversion baseline before expanding.

**Layer in Phrase Match** to capture search variants your exact match misses.

**Test Broad Match** with tROAS or tCPA bidding only after exact match has accumulated 30+ conversions. With Smart Bidding, broad match consistently finds cheaper conversions than exact alone.

### Negative Keywords: Non-Negotiable

A shared negative keyword list applied to all campaigns is the difference between broad match being an asset or a liability. Review the Search Terms report weekly for the first month. Add negatives for: competitor brand names, irrelevant job/career terms, geographic terms outside your service area, and any high-cost zero-conversion queries.

## Bidding Strategy by Account Stage

**New account (under 30 conversions/month):** Maximize Conversions bidding. Accumulates data faster than manual CPC.

**Growth stage (30-100 conversions/month):** Target CPA bidding. Set your target 20% above current CPA -- being too aggressive restricts delivery.

**Scale stage (100+ conversions/month):** Target ROAS for ecommerce, or continue tCPA for lead gen. At this volume, the algorithm has enough signal to be genuinely effective.

## Google Search Benchmarks by Industry (2026)

| Industry                       | Avg CPC | Avg CTR | Conv Rate | Target CPA |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|------------|
| Home Services (HVAC, Plumbing) | \$6.40  | 8.2%    | 9.1%      | \$45-\$80  |
| Legal Services                 | \$9.80  | 6.4%    | 5.2%      | \$80-\$150 |
| Dental / Medical               | \$7.20  | 7.1%    | 6.8%      | \$55-\$110 |
| Ecommerce (general)            | \$1.20  | 4.8%    | 3.2%      | \$18-\$45  |
| Real Estate                    | \$3.80  | 5.6%    | 4.4%      | \$60-\$140 |

GOOGLE 02

## Performance Max: How to Actually Make It Work

PMax is powerful when set up correctly and a budget black hole when it is not.

### When to Use Performance Max

**PMax for ecommerce:** If you have a product feed and spend \$3K+/month on Google Shopping, PMax consistently outperforms standard Shopping. Start by running PMax alongside existing campaigns, not replacing them.

**PMax for local services:** Store Goals PMax connects to your Google Business Profile and drives calls, directions, and local visits efficiently once it has 30+ conversion events to learn from.

**PMax for lead generation:** More mixed results. Works well for high-volume lead gen (100+ leads/month) but struggles with low-volume, high-value categories. Test with 20% of lead gen budget maximum.

### Audience Signals: Your Most Important Input

PMax audience signals tell Google where to start looking. Provide the strongest signals you have:

- Your customer list (uploaded email list)
- Website visitors -- all pages
- Purchasers or converters -- past 180 days
- In-market audiences most relevant to your category

### Asset Requirements

### + Headlines and descriptions: be specific

15 headlines (30 chars max), 5 descriptions (90 chars max). Write to a specific audience with a specific offer. Every headline should answer: who is this for, what do they get, why now.

### + Provide video -- or Google will auto-generate it

Auto-generated videos consistently underperform provided creative. Even a simple phone-filmed customer testimonial outperforms an auto-generated asset.

### + Add all available extensions

Sitelinks (minimum 4), callouts, call extensions, location extensions. Extensions increase ad real estate and Quality Score at no extra cost.

GOOGLE 03

## YouTube and Google Shopping

Two high-value channels most advertisers underuse.

### YouTube Ads: The Underpriced Awareness Channel

YouTube delivers Meta-level reach at a fraction of the CPM (\$4-\$9 for bumper ads). The key is winning the 5-second skip window.

**Skippable In-Stream (TrueView):** You pay only when the viewer watches 30 seconds or the full ad. Best for awareness and consideration. Target length: 30-90 seconds.

**Bumper Ads (non-skippable, 6 seconds):** Maximum reach per dollar. Best for retargeting warm audiences -- a 6-second reminder is enough when there is existing awareness.

The 5-second rule: open with movement, a bold on-screen text claim, or a direct-to-camera statement of the exact problem your viewer has. Never open with a logo animation or 'Hi, I am [name] from [company].'

### Google Shopping: Feed First, Bids Second

Most Shopping underperformance is a feed problem, not a bidding problem. Your product title IS your keyword targeting in Shopping. Include: Brand + Product Type + Key Attribute + Size/Colour. Avoid promotional language -- Google rejects it.

Feed quality checklist:

- All products have unique GTINs (barcodes) where available
- Product titles are 70-150 characters and keyword-rich
- All images on clean background, minimum 800x800px
- Price and availability sync in real-time (daily minimum)
- Custom labels applied for margin tiers and seasonal relevance
- Products with 0 sales in 60 days excluded or bid-reduced

Running Shopping through PMax gives Google maximum flexibility across all surfaces. Set a target ROAS 10-15% above your current blended Shopping ROAS when switching -- this gives the algorithm room to find profitable inventory before tightening the target.

## UNIFIED

## Full-Funnel Strategy, Attribution, and the 90-Day Launch Plan

How to make Meta and Google work together -- and measure what actually drives revenue.

### How Meta and Google Amplify Each Other

**Meta awareness drives Google branded search:** When someone sees your Meta ad 3-4 times and does not click, they frequently search for your brand on Google later. If you are not running a brand search campaign, competitors capture that intent you paid to create.

**Google Search data improves Meta copy:** The search terms that convert on Google tell you how your audience describes their own problem. Use this language in your Meta ad copy -- it is validated, high-intent language from real buyer searches.

**Unified retargeting:** Someone who clicked a Google Search ad and visited your website should enter your Meta retargeting campaign. Combined touchpoint frequency lifts conversion rates beyond what either platform achieves alone.

### Budget Allocation by Business Type

**Local service businesses** (HVAC, dental, legal, home services): 35% Meta / 65% Google. Search intent is high and immediate.

**Ecommerce brands:** 60% Meta / 40% Google. Meta is better for product discovery and impulse purchase.

**Lead generation (B2B, high-ticket services):** 40% Meta / 60% Google. Google captures existing demand. Meta nurtures over longer consideration cycles.

### Attribution: The Marketing Efficiency Ratio (MER)

**Attribution overlap is the most expensive measurement problem in multi-platform advertising. When a customer sees a Meta ad, clicks a Google Search ad, and purchases -- both platforms claim the full conversion. The solution: track MER (total revenue / total ad spend) as your true north metric.**

What to track weekly:

- MER (total revenue / total ad spend across all channels)
- Blended CPA or CPL across all platforms
- Meta reported ROAS vs actual Shopify/CRM revenue
- Google conversion volume by campaign type
- New customer acquisition rate vs returning customer rate

## The 90-Day Launch Plan

### + Days 1-14: Foundation (\$150-\$300/day total)

Meta: Install Pixel + CAPI, configure 8 priority events. Launch 1 TOF campaign (broad, 3 creatives) and 1 retargeting campaign. Google: Set up conversion tracking, launch 1 Search campaign with exact match on your 10-20 highest-intent keywords. Goal: collect data, do not optimise yet.

### + Days 15-30: Validation (\$300-\$500/day total)

Review: which Meta ad set has lowest CPA? Which Google keywords are converting? Pause underperformers (under \$150 spend AND no conversions). Duplicate the best-performing Meta ad set with a new creative angle. Expand Google to phrase match on proven exact match keywords.

### + Days 31-60: Optimisation (\$500-\$1,000/day total)

Meta: Scale the winning TOF campaign by 15% every 5 days (if ROAS above target). Test Advantage+ Audience. Google: Add tCPA or tROAS on campaigns with 30+ conversions. Test 1 broad match keyword with Smart Bidding. Launch a brand keyword campaign.

### + Days 61-90: Scaling (\$1,000-\$1,700/day total)

Meta: Introduce horizontal scaling with 20% of Meta budget for new audience tests. Begin creative production system (4-6 new variants per week). Google: Launch Performance Max if ecommerce. Expand to Display remarketing for high-intent visitors. Monthly: run MER calculation and compare to platform-reported ROAS.

### Fix before scaling when you see:

- Any ad set in Learning Limited for more than 10 days
- Landing page conversion rate below 1.5%
- Meta CPM rising faster than conversions
- MER declining as spend increases

### Scale faster when you see:

- MER above your target for 10+ consecutive days
- ROAS improving week-over-week without changes
- Audience frequency below 2.0 despite budget increases
- Google Search impression share lost to budget

BONUS

## Platform Benchmarks Reference Sheet

All 2026 benchmarks in one place. Use these every week to evaluate your account.

### Meta Ads Benchmarks (2026)

| Meta Metric         | Poor  | Average   | Good     | Excellent | Notes                   |
|---------------------|-------|-----------|----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| CTR (Link Click)    | <0.7% | 1.0-1.5%  | 1.6-2.5% | >2.5%     | Cold audience, Feed     |
| CPM (Cold audience) | >\$20 | \$12-\$18 | \$8-\$12 | <\$8      | Varies by audience      |
| ROAS (Ecommerce)    | <2x   | 2x-3x     | 3x-5x    | >5x       | 7-day click, 1-day view |

| Meta Metric            | Poor  | Average | Good    | Excellent | Notes                    |
|------------------------|-------|---------|---------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Frequency (Cold 7-day) | >3.5  | 2.0-3.0 | 1.5-2.0 | <1.5      | Above 3.5 = fatigue risk |
| Video 3-sec view rate  | <15%  | 15-25%  | 25-40%  | >40%      | Measures hook strength   |
| Landing page CVR       | <1.5% | 2-3%    | 3-5%    | >5%       | Paid traffic target      |

Google Ads Benchmarks (2026)

| Google Metric    | Poor    | Average     | Good        | Excellent | Notes                    |
|------------------|---------|-------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Search CTR       | <3%     | 4-6%        | 6-9%        | >9%       | Keyword-dependent        |
| Quality Score    | 1-4     | 5-6         | 7-8         | 9-10      | Aim for 7+ on all groups |
| Search Conv Rate | <2%     | 3-5%        | 5-8%        | >8%       | Industry varies          |
| PMax ROAS        | <3x     | 3x-5x       | 5x-8x       | >8x       | Ecom with product feed   |
| Shopping ROAS    | <3x     | 3x-4x       | 4x-6x       | >6x       | Feed quality is key      |
| YouTube CPV      | >\$0.10 | \$0.05-0.08 | \$0.03-0.05 | <\$0.03   | Cost per 30-sec view     |
| Brand Search CPC | >\$0.80 | \$0.30-0.60 | \$0.15-0.30 | <\$0.15   | Always protect brand     |

Ready to Put This Into Practice?

Elevare Creative manages Meta and Google Ads for ecommerce brands and local service businesses at any budget. We offer a free 30-minute account review where we identify your top 3 highest-leverage improvements -- no obligation.

Book your free review: [elevarecreative.net](https://elevarecreative.net)