

# 2026 Programmatic Advertising Guide for Media Buyers



**It's been more than 30 years since the very first banner ad appeared on the internet. Now, three decades later, brands buy billions of digital ads every day, and programmatic represents the machinery underneath most of it.**

Programmatic is the default way advertisers buy display, mobile web, in-app, social, audio, digital out-of-home (DOOH), and connected TV (CTV) ads at scale. But in 2026, it is running in a more complicated environment: Consumer navigation is shifting as AI-powered search and AI assistants compress discovery journeys and answer questions directly. That shift is beginning to change the balance of power across channels, formats, and even supply paths.

Even so, the market fundamentals remain powerful. Global programmatic ad spend [reached \\$642 billion in 2025 and is expected to grow to nearly \\$800 billion by 2028](#). In the U.S., digital ad spending long ago surpassed traditional channels, [with the vast majority of that spend going into mobile specifically](#).

Programmatic advertising continues to grow because it solves meaningful pain points for both the buy and sell sides of the transaction. It increases reach, improves efficiency, supports real-time optimization, and helps advertisers and publishers navigate a fragmented, omnichannel world.

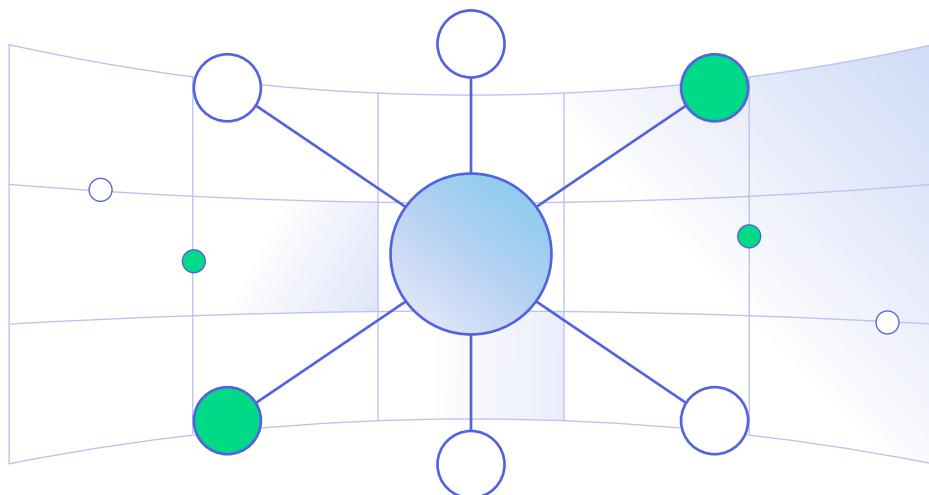
Read on as we explore the programmatic advertising ecosystem in 2026, how programmatic advertising works, its benefits, the trends shaping the year ahead, and best practices for improving ROI.

# What is programmatic advertising?

Programmatic advertising is the automated process of buying and selling ad placements in the digital ecosystem. Programmatic media buying connects publishers and app developers with advertisers in real-time auctions for ad space on websites, apps, and any other digital medium where ads are placed.

Programmatic ad buying enables centralized, automated, algorithmic bidding on multiple publishers' properties at once, so advertisers can win the highest quality ad impressions at the best possible price.

For publishers and developers, programmatic advertising helps drive monetization by filling ad inventory automatically, in real time and with the most suitable ads, with far less effort.



# How does programmatic advertising work?

Every day, billions of ads are served on digital media all over the world. Advertising technology platforms automate the complex process of connecting billions of ads with billions of ad spaces by running real-time auctions to connect supply (publishers) with demand (advertisers).

Programmatic advertising relies on several online systems that connect with one another to make the media buying process happen. Here is how those systems typically work together:

- 1 An advertiser is looking to purchase ad space to promote their product or brand, so they turn to a trade desk or programmatic advertising agency. These programmatic advertising companies use a DSP (demand-side platform), which automates the bidding and buying process on behalf of the advertiser.
- 2 The DSP connects the advertiser to many publishers at once, bringing a wide range of options for where the ad might be placed. With the help of a DMP (data management platform), the DSP analyzes audience data based on a range of parameters, such as location, user behavior, and demographics, to decide which ad placement to bid for, and at what price.
- 3 On the other side of the equation, publishers use an SSP (supply-side platform) to offer up their available advertising inventory.
- 4 When a user lands on a publisher's digital property, the publisher sends a request to the SSP, which meets the DSP in an exchange, where an auction process begins. The DSP bids on behalf of advertisers, using data to decide which advertising opportunities are best suited to the consumer. Advertisers send in their bids; the ad is selected and served to the consumer.

This process happens within the seconds it takes for the consumer's webpage or mobile app to load and is repeated billions of times per day.

That said, in 2026, the legacy boundaries between "demand-side" and "supply-side" are getting blurrier. Supply-side platforms are rolling out more sophisticated curation of erings that pair audience data with inventory, creating packaged supply paths designed to reduce duplication, improve transparency, and concentrate spend into higher-quality environments. Meanwhile, buyers are increasingly evaluating supply not just as raw inventory, but as curated portfolios that bundle media, data, and controls into a single buying decision. In the coming years, the typical DSP and SSP breakdown described above will become much more consolidated.

# What are the 4 main types of programmatic advertising?

Programmatic advertising comes in several variations. Here are the four most common types used today:



#01

## Real-Time Bidding (RTB)

Real-time bidding is a type of programmatic advertising where advertisers compete for ad inventory in auctions conducted in the moment. RTB often operates with the CPM (cost per mille) model, meaning advertisers set their bid and pay publishers per 1,000 impressions.



#02

## Private Marketplace (PMP)

Private marketplace, or PMP, is a type of programmatic advertising that takes place in a closed auction, where a set of selected advertising partners participate. It can provide advertisers access to unique inventory not available on the open exchange and enables publishers to tailor inventory and create specialty offerings.



#03

## Preferred Deals

A preferred deal is a buying method where the publisher and advertiser negotiate a price for ad space. The advertiser gets preferential access to bid at the agreed price. Preferred deals are not guaranteed: The publisher is not required to hold the ad space, and the advertiser is not obligated to bid.



#04

## Programmatic Guaranteed

Programmatic guaranteed is when a publisher and advertiser negotiate the cost and terms of a particular inventory package, and that inventory is reserved for the specific advertiser at the agreed-upon price.

# What are the 7 most common programmatic ad formats?

Programmatic advertising is used to buy and sell digital ad space for a wide range of formats and channels. Here is a quick overview of the formats most commonly bought programmatically:



## 1. Display ads

Display ads, or banner ads, appear on desktop and mobile websites, typically at the top or sides of a web page. Programmatic display remains a core format because it offers broad reach and flexibility, but it also tends to deliver lower click-through rates than richer formats. Importantly, given the rise of AI search results and the subsequent reduction in click-through traffic to many publisher sites, it's likely that spend will shift away from traditional display over time.



## 2. Video ads

Programmatic video is widely used across apps, connected TV, and social. Video can generate higher engagement than static display. For example, a user completes a level in a mobile game and hits a transition point. The publisher may offer a video ad in that moment, and advertisers can bid programmatically for that high-attention placement.



## 3. Social ads

Today, [about 5.17 billion people, or 64% of the global population](#), use social media.

Social programmatic advertising is a powerful tool to reach a vast audience efficiently and target them using their social graph and interests. Advertisers use DSPs, as well as platforms' native tools, to bid programmatically for ad space on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, Reddit, and more.



## 4. Native ads

Native ads are designed to match the look and feel of the content environment they appear in. Because native placements can feel less disruptive, they can be useful for upper-funnel and mid-funnel goals. Many native exchanges also support contextual approaches that are becoming more important in privacy-first environments.

# Continue: 7 most common programmatic ad formats



## 5. Audio ads

Digital audio listening [is at an all-time high. More than 584 million people tune in to podcasts each month](#), with U.S. listenership exceeding 158 million (more than half of Americans aged 12+). For that reason, digital audio continues to be a growing and meaningful channel, with advertisers bidding programmatically for ad space across podcasts, music streaming apps, and digital radio.



## 6. Digital out-of-home (DOOH)

DOOH includes digital billboards and screens in public spaces. It supports omnichannel strategies by extending reach beyond phones and computers, and programmatic buying helps optimize by time, place, and audience context.



## 7. In-app programmatic advertising

In the U.S., people spend [an average of 4 hours and 30 minutes a day on their phones](#), making in-app advertising an attractive option for advertisers. Mobile programmatic advertising works the same way as programmatic advertising on the web. However, in-app ads have unique formats and sizing to fit the smaller mobile screen. The main ad formats for in-app advertising include interstitial ads, banner ads, splash ads, rewarded ads, playable ads and rich media ads.

When discussing ad formats, it's important to note that, in 2026, ad models for AI search platforms and AI assistants are only beginning to emerge, and these channels might evolve into a distinct category of their own.

As AI-driven search grows, advertisers should expect experimentation with new formats that prioritize sponsored answers, assistant-native recommendations, and commerce actions embedded directly into conversational interfaces.



# What are the benefits of programmatic advertising?

Programmatic advertising offers substantial benefits for both advertisers and publishers. These are a few of the most significant:



## Reach

Programmatic advertising connects advertisers with large pools of publishers at once, expanding potential audience reach. For publishers, programmatic makes inventory available to many advertisers, increasing competition for placements and supporting monetization.



## Omnichannel targeting

Marketers need to build awareness and performance across multiple touchpoints, including desktop web, mobile web, apps, DOOH, and CTV. Programmatic advertising enables advertisers to bid for optimal placements across channels and coordinate multi-channel strategies.



## Automated tasks

Automation removes much of the manual work from ad bidding, buying, and placement. By reducing rote tasks, programmatic can free teams to focus more on audience research and strategic optimization.



## Real-time results and optimization

Programmatic platforms offer visibility into results as campaigns run. That feedback loop helps advertisers optimize faster and can support better controls against low-quality and fraudulent placements.



## Better ROI

Automation, data-driven insights, and real-time optimization can improve return on ad spend. Programmatic enables advertisers to monitor performance across campaigns and channels in one centralized operation and make faster adjustments.

# Programmatic advertising trends for 2026

In 2026, programmatic is still growing, but the “how” is changing.

The industry is moving away from an ecosystem optimized primarily for scale toward one optimized for quality, control, and adaptability.

These five trends are shaping that shift:

## #01 Curation moves from “nice to have” to a default buying layer.

Curation is increasingly the mechanism buyers use to reduce waste, consolidate supply paths, and create more intentional media portfolios. Instead of buying inventory as a broad pool, curated marketplaces pair audience data with specific, transparent supply relationships. The value proposition is straightforward: [fewer redundant paths, fewer unknowns, and more control over where budgets flow](#).

As more advertisers pressure the supply chain to prove its value, curated supply packages are becoming a practical answer to long-standing programmatic inefficiencies.

## #02 Agentic buying changes execution, but it does not erase strategy.

Agentic workflows are [starting to influence](#) how programmatic campaigns are planned, optimized, and governed. Protocols and tools built for agentic demand aim to make buying more automated, but the big shift is not “hands-off” marketing.” It is faster iteration and more adaptive decisioning within guardrails.

## #03 Measurement remains complicated, and expectations are recalibrating,

Despite robust programmatic tooling, holistic campaign measurement [is still constrained by real-world realities](#): inconsistent identity signals, fragmented platforms, walled gardens, multi-touch journeys, and the growing share of impressions that do not produce a neat click-path to a conversion.

In 2026, sophisticated buyers are increasingly separating what they want to measure from what is realistically measurable, and then designing testing frameworks that match those constraints. The winners will be advertisers who treat measurement as an operating discipline, not a dashboard.

# Continue: Programmatic advertising trends for 2026

## #04 **AI expands from optimization to segmentation and supply packaging.**

AI's role in programmatic continues to broaden, moving beyond bid optimization into audience construction, content-based segmentation, and smarter supply packaging. AI-driven approaches are increasingly used to interpret signals at scale and translate them into actionable segments and curated buying opportunities, particularly in mobile and omnichannel environments.

In other words: AI is not only helping decide what to bid. It is also shaping what "inventory quality" and "audience relevance" mean in the first place.

## #05 **AI search reshapes format investments, creating new inventory gravity.**

As AI search and conversational interfaces reduce click-through behavior on the open web, advertisers will rebalance investments toward environments where attention is still deep and measurable, including mobile, video, and in-app experiences. At the same time, new opportunities will emerge inside AI assistants and AI-powered search experiences, likely mixing sponsorship, commerce actions, and recommendation-style placements.

This trend matters for programmatic because it changes where demand pressure accumulates. If fewer sessions begin and end on publisher pages, more competition will concentrate in channels that still offer high-intent and high-attention moments, and the industry will need new norms for what "good inventory" looks like in answer-first experiences.

# Improve ROI by following programmatic advertising best practices

By keeping up with best practices and mastering the latest tools, advertisers can maximize campaign performance and return on ad spend. Here are programmatic best practices to prioritize in 2026:

## Align your campaign goals to the programmatic channel and ad type.

All digital campaigns should be based on specific goals and KPIs. Define and align the objective of your ad campaign to the channel and format. For example, programmatic display and in-app ads can support the same product, but they typically require different creative approaches and performance expectations.

## Segment your audience.

Group your audience into segments based on location, behavior, interests, or funnel stage (awareness, consideration, conversion). Strong segmentation makes it easier to deliver the right message at the right time, and it creates a better foundation for real-time optimization.

## Use data to drive decisions.

Programmatic provides real-time feedback across campaigns and channels. Use that data to understand what is working, what is not, and why, then translate those insights into targeting, creative, and supply adjustments.

## Test and optimize.

Programmatic is an ideal environment for experimentation. Use frequent A/B testing and iterate quickly based on results.

## Use an omnichannel approach.

Programmatic works best when it reaches audiences across multiple touchpoints. A multi-channel strategy can expand reach and increase the volume of performance data available for optimization.

## Add curation to your buying strategy.

Curation helps advertisers pair data with inventory in more intentional, transparent ways. By concentrating spend into curated supply paths and premium environments, buyers can reduce duplication, improve controls, and push budgets toward higher-quality outcomes.

## Stay nimble as the ecosystem shifts.

Consumer behavior is changing quickly as AI reshapes discovery, attention, and conversion paths. Build planning and optimization cycles that assume change, not stability. That includes shorter test windows, clearer guardrails, and flexibility to shift budget across formats as new inventory and performance patterns emerge.

# How to get started with programmatic advertising with Start.io

There are numerous programmatic advertising platforms spanning web, mobile, DOOH, and CTV. While similar in many ways, each platform has distinct features, tools, and operating models.

Start.io is a sell-side omnichannel advertising platform powered by real-time mobile audiences. It delivers hundreds of millions of ads per day across thousands of leading apps, using AI to power more efficient, effective, and precise campaigns.

Through direct integration with thousands of mobile publishers, Start.io has access to more than 100 billion first-party data signals per day across the globe, supporting privacy-conscious audience targeting and supply packaging at scale.

To learn more about how Start.io can help supercharge your programmatic advertising, contact us today

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