

EVENT GUIDE

THE CMO'S GUIDE TO THE AI SEARCH REVOLUTION

INSIDE:

Your guide to getting ahead of the biggest shakeup in the history of paid search.

Launch!





DANNY IRELAND

HEAD OF PAID MEDIA
LAUNCH

GOOGLE ADS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME

We're witnessing the biggest shift there has ever been in how people search. This means the Google ads rule book is being rewritten at a breakneck pace, with daily updates on how they're adapting their technology to user behaviour.

It's overwhelming and when combined with a tough business climate, we're seeing marketing teams struggle to keep up.

That's why we've brought together our brightest minds and detailed knowledge to produce this simple roadmap to navigating the changes – so you don't have to.

Search has become intent-led and conversational.

The role of keywords has diminished and marketing strategies need to be adapted accordingly.

Our roadmap helps you work out how by sharing:

- A brief guide to the most recent technical updates
- A deep dive into AI Max and how to harness it
- A new operating model for Google Ads
- A collection of changes you can make now to stay ahead of competitors
- Tips directly from our experts who live and breathe Google Ads, day in and day out.

It's our job as a performance agency to stay on top of technical nuance.

For marketing leaders what matters is the context.

We hope this guide helps you feel empowered to master the new search landscape.

We're always here if you have questions.

**All the best,
Danny**

GET IN TOUCH



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1. AT A GLANCE: HOW SEARCH HAS CHANGED

Search is now dominated by long tail, conversational keywords. Almost 60% of searches end with zero clicks, and when **Universal Commerce Protocol** is introduced in the UK this percentage will skyrocket as the user can purchase natively within the AI agent.

LONG TAIL QUERIES

800% increase in Searches including 8 words or more

70% of keywords globally are estimated to be long-tail and conversational

UNPREDICTABLE

15% of queries made each day are brand new

AUTOMATED

37% of users start their queries with AI

ZERO CLICK

59% of searches end with zero clicks

THEN

"mens clothing"



"summer dresses"



"mens shirts"

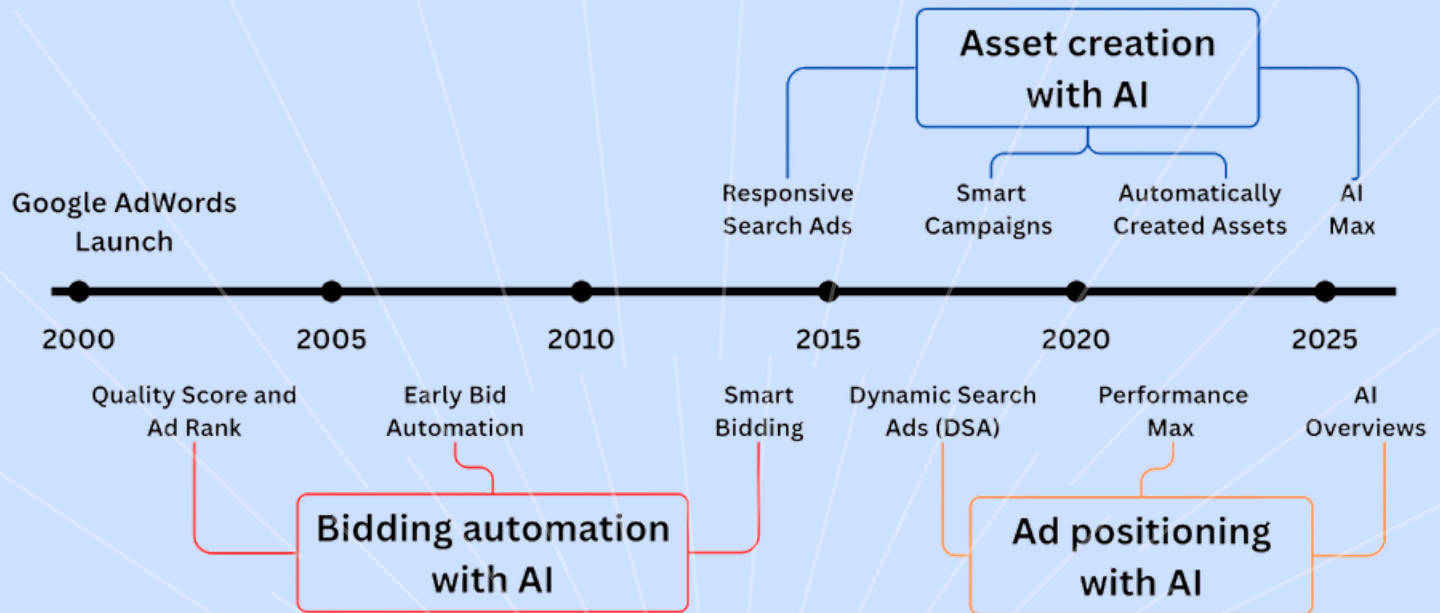


NOW

"Me and my husband are going to Portugal in June, what clothes shall we buy?"



AI IN GOOGLE ADS: A TIMELINE



2. THE GOOGLE PLATFORM UPDATES YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

TITLE	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT MARKETERS NEED TO CONSIDER
AI Max	Google predicts what users want based on their past actions, not just the words they type. Will replace DSA's in the future as these are sunset by Google.	Increases your reach, but carries a high risk of waste if your data signals are weak.
Smart Bidding exploration and broader query capture	The algorithm goes off-road to find new customer profiles who do not look like your usual buyers.	This helps your brand scale, but puts your daily budget at risk during the learning phase.
Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP)	Google creates a smooth, single path to purchase. If the AI sees a customer is ready to buy, it shortcuts the journey.	Improves immediate conversion rates, but reduces your direct control over the brand experience.
Profit Margin Bidding and Demand-Led Budget Pacing	New settings allow you to tell Google to prioritise profitable sales rather than raw volume.	Protects your bottom line and prevents the algorithm from spending your entire allocation by midday.
Qualified Future Conversions (QFC)	Measurement tools now track whether a user is likely to buy later, rather than just recording a single click.	Provides an accurate picture of long-term value so you stop chasing empty traffic.

3.THE EXPERT VIEW: GOOGLE'S AI MAX

THE TOOL THAT TAPS YOU IN TO THE AI ADVANTAGE

THE FIRST STEP IS OFTEN THE HARDEST

With so many major changes unrolled on Google ads at once, marketing leaders might feel like they're staring into the abyss and not sure how to make progress. I'd recommend working with your agency to experiment within AI Max as a steady way to dip your toe into AI powered search.

THE SEARCH FOUR

When I attended the Google Exec Circle AI Max event they introduced the concept of the 'Search Four' to maximise ROI:

- Data Strength: Build and activate your data strength to boost ROI – connect your data sources and maximise signals in Data Manager
- Bidding Goals: Align your bidding strategies with your business goals
- AI Targeting and Creatives: Adopt the best AI powered solutions to drive your goals
- Demand-led Budgets: set flexible budgets to unlock maximum opportunity

Solid principles straight from the creators to help guide experimentation plans.

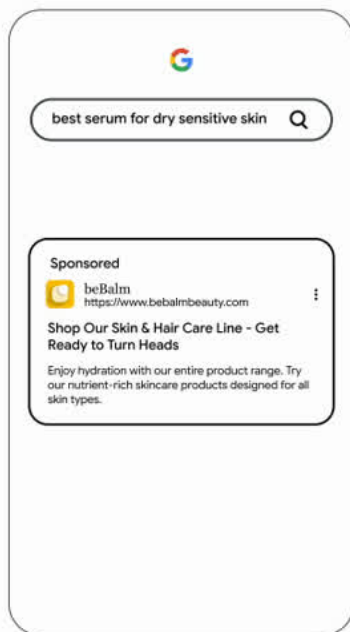


JOSH MARINARO
PAID MEDIA DIRECTOR,
LAUNCH

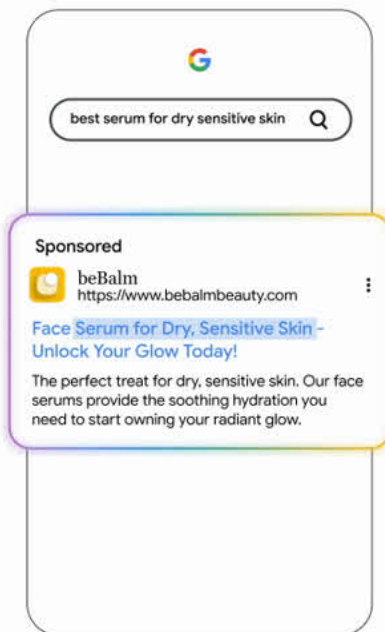
"MAKE SURE YOUR ADS ARE BECOMING ANSWERS AND YOU'RE NOT JUST SAYING 'BUY FROM US' BECAUSE RIGHT NOW IT'S NOT ENOUGH."

AI MAX FOR SEARCH CAMPAIGNS: VISUALISED

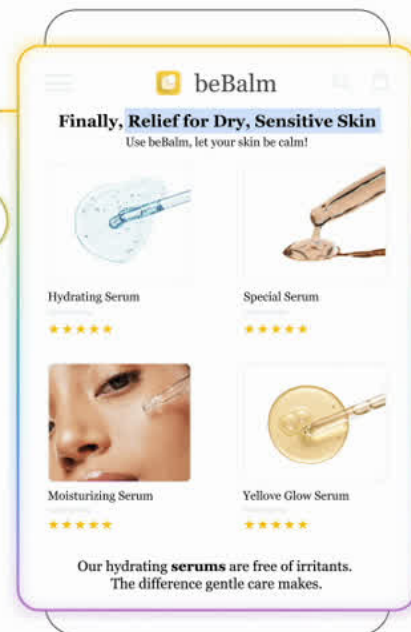
AI Max for Search campaigns



Search ads



Keywordless technology in action with specific ad copy powered by AI Max for Search campaigns



Final URL expansion: Finds the best Product Landing page

HOW AI MAX FITS INTO THE SEARCH MATRIX

TRADITIONAL SEARCH

2016 - KEYWORDS

45% zero click searches*

Red shoes

Buy laptop

Cheap flights

Signals of intent



AI POWERED SEARCH

2026 - CONVERSATIONAL

80-85% zero click searches (projected)*

AI MAX: HOW IT WORKS

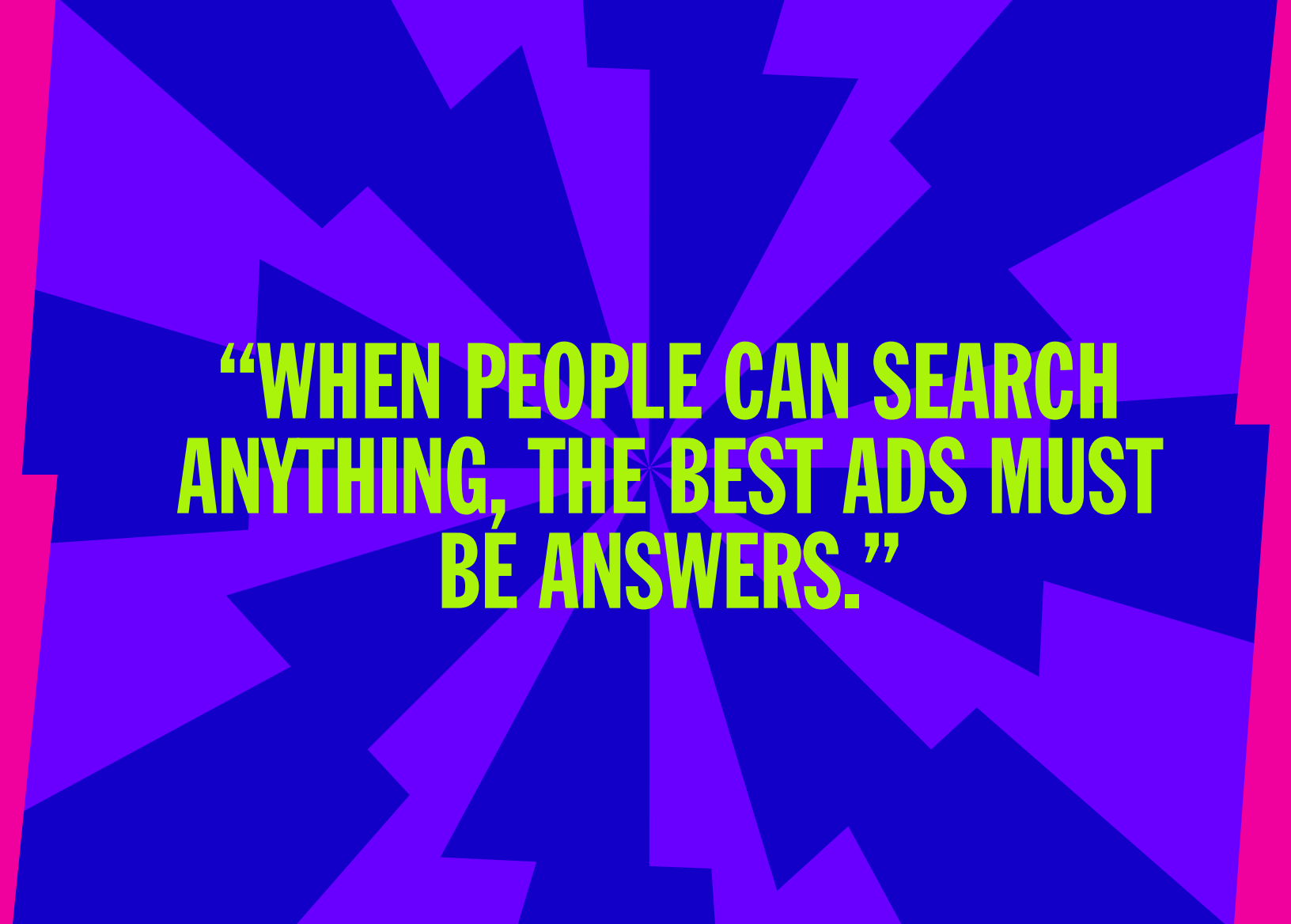
- AI Max draws from landing pages and assets for ad matching. Keywords used to be a strict boundary, now they are a compass for the algorithm.
- Success relies on high quality data signals, not granular control.
- Modern campaigns derive over 70% of conversion value from long-tail conversational signals.

TRADITIONAL SEARCH MATCH	AI MAX FOR SEARCH
Keyword syntax	Semantic intent and behaviour
Manual ad copy	Dynamic asset optimisation
Baseline ROAS	+27% conversions (exact/phrase base)

14%

Average conversion uplift when activating AI Max

*Source Google *How People are Using AI Made in the US.*



**“WHEN PEOPLE CAN SEARCH
ANYTHING, THE BEST ADS MUST
BE ANSWERS.”**

4.THE EXPERT VIEW: AGENTIC AI

THE SHIFT FROM TRADITIONAL AUTOMATED SEARCH TO AGENTIC COMMERCE IS VERY MUCH UNDERWAY, AS THESE UPDATES FROM GOOGLE DEMONSTRATE.

Traditional AI acts on instructions whereas agentic AI acts on intent. Google is deploying background agents—like Gemini Spark—which operate 24/7, reasoning through product compatibility, monitoring price history. Eventually they'll complete transactions on behalf of the consumer.

HOW THIS IMPACTS YOUR BUSINESS ECONOMICS

For marketing leaders, this changes your business economics in three ways:

WEBSITE REDIRECTS ARE BECOMING DEFUNCT

Features like the Universal Cart and Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP) allow users to buy directly within search results, YouTube, or Gmail using Google Pay.

THE RISE OF AGENT-TO-AGENT (A2A) INTERACTION

Larger enterprises are embedding on-site Merchant Agents. Your brand's AI can securely authenticate a buyer's CRM token to instantly apply loyalty club pricing, run real-time dynamic pricing negotiations, or scan your ERP network to save an out-of-stock sale.

FIXES REVENUE LEAKS

The latest numbers suggest migrating to a Gemini-backed commerce engine can deliver a 95% reduction in failed web searches – If a buyer types a complex question, describes a look, or makes a typo, the AI still understands what they mean and shows them the right product. Revenue is uplifted since customers actually find what they want instead of hitting a dead-end page. So they buy more. Owning a frictionless on-site shopping experience can also help you protect your market share.



JON BREEDS
PAID MEDIA MANAGER,
LAUNCH



THE BOTTOM LINE

If you are running on **Shopify Plus**, UCP infrastructure is already built natively into your store.

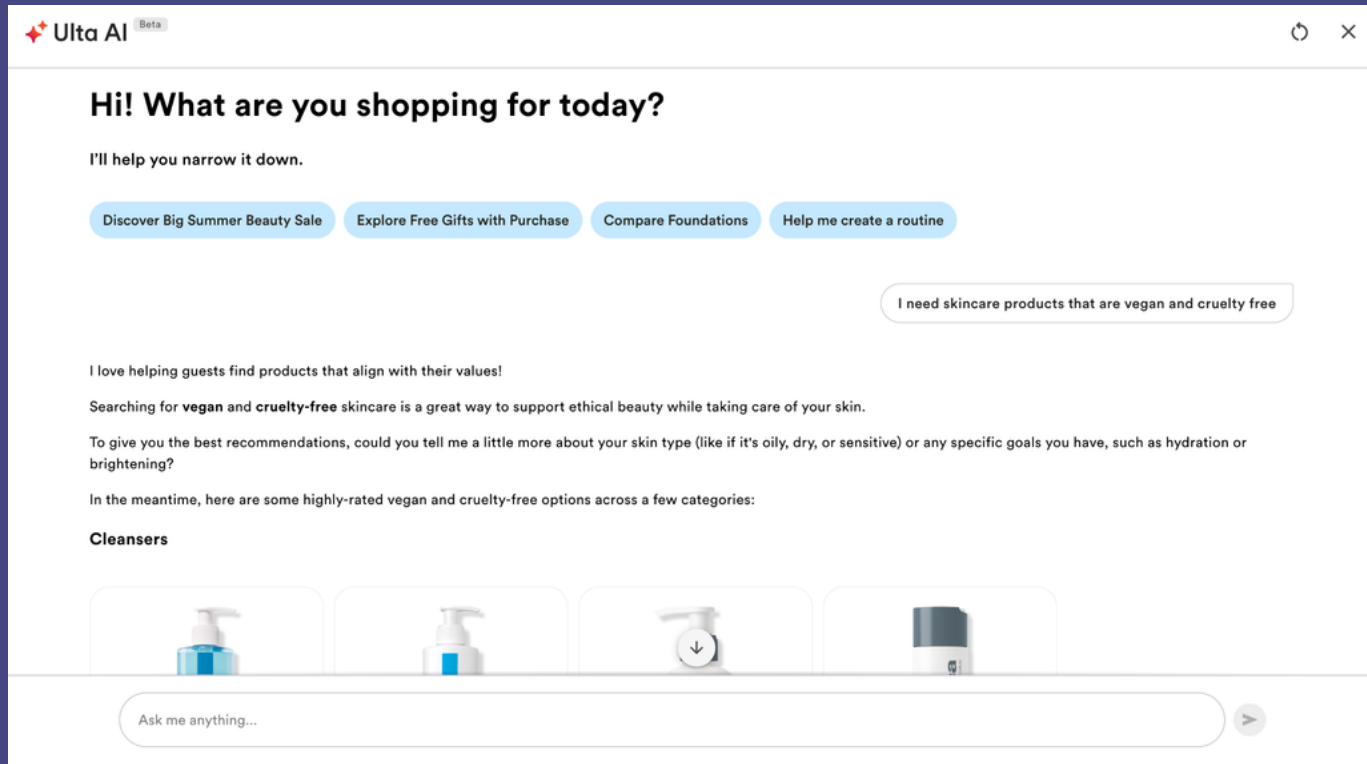
Your competitive advantage now lies in the completeness of the structured, machine-readable inventory data you feed into it.

This article guides you through nailing that data.

AGENTIC AI: VISUALISED

Based on queries, Agentic AI will actively uncover hidden customer needs, i.e. if someone asks for help planning a camping trip, the agent can look beyond the obvious items like tents and help surface highly relevant cross-selling opportunities too. These will ultimately drive bigger basket values and improve conversion rates.

Here's an example from Ulta Beauty – NB this uses the merchant's own AI, embedded on their website.



5.THE STAKES: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CMOS?

BRAND SAFETY

Google's AI glues together your ad copy using raw website data and legacy assets. The system could hallucinate and serve outdated or incorrect information. Protecting your brand equity requires proactive, human-engineered guardrails.

CONTROL

Handing over control to an algorithm always carries risk. Tools like AI Max will dynamically render creative assets and use keywordless matching to chase conversational queries, which could target the wrong audience or go off piste with your brand narrative.

MEASUREMENT

65% and 80% of searches are zero-click thanks to AI Overviews. Website traffic and click-through rates can make campaigns look like they are failing even if they are driving demand. If CMOs want to prove return on investment of their brand's visibility they must turn to Media Mix Modelling and predictive frameworks like Qualified Future Conversions.

MARGIN

If unguided, automated campaigns may chase volume at the expense of your actual business margins. If campaigns aren't structured tightly around actual product profit margins, the algorithm could optimise for low-margin inventory. Features like the Universal Commerce Protocol where users buy directly within search results or YouTube completely bypass your website and any traditional on-site upselling opportunities.

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Every competitor in your market now has access to the exact same automated bidding and targeting tools. Machine learning systems only perform as well as the inputs they are given. Data Strength and Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) are non-negotiable to stay ahead.

SPEED OF DECISION MAKING

The search landscape operates at machine speed now, so delays to updating your brand's positioning and messaging carry more weight. AI engines aggressively prioritise fresh, authoritative information. Slow-moving strategies get deprioritised automatically.

6. SEARCH REIMAGINED: A NEW OPERATING MODEL

At Launch we practice a connected approach to performance marketing. This means combining data, experimentation, creative and paid media. Experience has taught us this formula maximises growth for our clients. That's why we've structured our model around these areas, making it easier for you to plan around the pillars which truly have impact.



1. DATA

**UPGRADE
INFRASTRUCTURE
AND KPIS**



2. EXPERIMENTATION

**TESTING AI
CAPABILITIES**



3. PAID MEDIA

**RESTRUCTURING
FOR INTENT**



4. CREATIVE

**MACHINE
READABLE
CONTENT**

1. DATA: UPGRADE INFRASTRUCTURE AND KPIS



AI models are only as powerful as the data inputs you feed them. To succeed, you need to rethink how your business collects data and measures success.

Here's how:

- 1. Unify first party data.** CMOs need to connect fragmented data silos (using platforms like Converge or Google's Data Manager) so the AI can read cross-channel signals—from offline CRM interactions to online web behaviour.
- 2. Overhaul your board-level metrics.** Evaluating your marketing health through website traffic and click-through rates will no longer give you an accurate picture of how campaigns are performing as AI overviews answer questions directly on the results page. Shift your tracking to focus on revenue per click, your share of voice in AI answers, brand mention sentiment, and AI citation rates.
- 3. Attribution overhaul.** Because AI stitches together non-linear, fragmented customer journeys, marketers should adopt Media Mix Modeling (MMM) and view-through attribution to understand the holistic lift of their campaigns.
- 4. Implement Server-Side Tracking (SST) to Future-Proof Data Collection** SST uses first party cookies to help understand users whilst compliantly parsing data back to the platform.



2. EXPERIMENTATION: TESTING AI CAPABILITIES

The transition to agentic AI requires a shift from manual optimisation to structured, continuous testing:

1. **Adopt a unified marketing loop.** Paid and organic search should no longer be siloed. CMOs should use paid campaigns as high-velocity testing environments to find which cohort-and-intent combinations convert best. Those proven learnings should then dictate how organic content is built.

2. **Test Smart Bidding Exploration.**

Allow AI to test flexible Return on Ad Spend (ROAS) targets to uncover high-value, previously untapped conversational search queries.

3. **Methodical AI Max Rollouts.** When testing new formats like AI Max, CMOs need to be patient. Campaigns require a 1-to-2-week learning period to gather data and stabilise before making adjustments, with full evaluations happening after about four weeks.

3. PAID MEDIA: RESTRUCTURING FOR INTENT



1. Group by User Context, Not Keyword

Match Types: Segregating accounts by rigid keyword match types is outdated and restricts the algorithm's efficiency. Eight-plus word conversational queries are up by 800% year-on-year, making it borderline impossible to manually predict every variation of how consumers look for your brand.

A high-value customer may spend weeks researching the technical specifications of your product, but complete their final purchase on a phrase that looks entirely unrelated (such as searching for a "premium housewarming gift"). Restructure your accounts around the user's broader intent and context, treating traditional keywords as guiding signals rather than strict targets.

2. Look at the bigger performance

picture. Bidding exclusively on high-intent transactional terms means you are competing in the most crowded, expensive auctions – bad news for your profit margins. Your media strategy must balance brand awareness and demand generation.

Rather than scrutinising individual platforms, take a step back to see how the whole performance system is functioning. Set a baseline and test – what happens to growth if you shift budget from A to B? Give it time – changes won't be visible overnight.

3. Implement Smart, Human-Led

Guardrails: Leaning into automated tools like AI Max and Performance Max (PMax) does not mean handing over control to a platform black box. Protect your brand equity and prevent the machine from going off-piste by setting firm, proactive boundaries.

Deploy Google's brand guidelines and text asset customisation layers to input explicit guidelines, dictating what the AI can say.

Manage risk by using a sandboxed testing setup: run 50/50 split experiments that isolate a controlled AI Max environment against your legacy baseline campaign to validate incremental conversions before scaling your media investment.



4. CREATIVE: MACHINE-READABLE CONTENT

Ad creative is no longer just a static asset. Automated search uses creative elements for targeting. The clarity, structure, and depth of your assets are what actively filter your audience and command consumer attention.

1. Engineer for machine readability. To ensure automated search engines cite your brand, your content must be structured specifically for AI extractors. Put a clear, 40-to-60-word direct answer right at the top of your informational sections. Use clear FAQ schemas and embed structured HTML tables so the algorithm can read your product facts instantly. [Our blog on product feed data can help.](#)

2. Feed the AI high-density assets.

Automated platforms dynamically assemble ad layouts to answer complex, conversational questions in real time. Because the system relies heavily on the overall depth of your asset pool, a single text ad is no longer enough to win the auction. Marketers must provide high-quality product feeds, precise value propositions, and a diverse library of video and imagery.

3. Prioritise freshness and authority. AI models prefer citing factual details that are fresh, reliable, and backed by a clear consensus. Ensure your commercial statistics are constantly updated. Your content strategy should focus on embedding original data and expert quotes to build a sustainable citation bank for AI answer summaries.

7.WHAT TO DO NOW

Work with your performance agency on the following.

MAINTAINING CONTROL

Standard keyword-level performance reports will no longer help you move forward. But losing keyword visibility does not mean losing brand governance.

Your agency's value has shifted from manual campaign builds to their ability to train the AI using natural-language steering tools and managing rigorous preview approvals for automated text and imagery before it goes live.

Stop reviewing search term lists during your performance meetings. Instead, demand that your agency shows you the strict brand parameters and natural-language AI Briefs they have built to govern the engine's behaviour.

Use [AI Briefs](#) to give Google AI more context to better steer performance.

GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

AI marketing systems are only as effective as the data they receive. Robust CAPI implementation and comprehensive conversion tracking across every micro-event are now essential.

Success comes from combining high-quality first-party data with strong brand building and creative that captures attention, builds emotional connection, educates and then later in the journey persuades the user to convert.

Align your teams around two priorities: data quality and content velocity. Ensure your agency is feeding platforms with your best CRM and first-party conversion data, while your creative team rapidly tests and iterates new assets to maximise performance.

7.WHAT TO DO NOW

Work with your performance agency on the following.

MEASURING WITH PURPOSE

Traditional website optimisation loses its edge when native checkouts bypass your site completely.

Instruct your board to stop measuring marketing health purely by traffic or click-through rates.

Instead, have your agency use AI for predictive analysis: forecasting who is likely to buy and where to spend budget most effectively.

Meanwhile, shift core KPIs to revenue per click, AI share of voice, and the value of zero-click discovery.

PROTECTING MARGINS

Leaving your targets on autopilot caps your profit margins.

Don't let the ad platform decide the balance between your efficiency and your ad spend. Push your targets higher to protect your profit headroom.

Agree with your agency on the exact, profitable CPA limit where you can completely uncap your budget to capture hidden demand.

BUILDING YOUR BRAND

Expect your growth partner to build a media structure that works across every stage of the customer journey. Most prospects need at least 10 meaningful interactions before they buy. Investing in brand awareness and consideration layers (where CPMs are significantly cheaper) allows you to build relationships with tomorrow's customers without burning budget. Hold your agency accountable for tailoring media to where users actually sit in their journey, introducing new-to-brand audiences properly rather than treating every ad like an immediate sales pitch.

8. LEARN FROM THE MASTERS

Launch's expert teams have shared their hot takes on these major shifts across Google ads and how CMOs can take advantage.



DANNY IRELAND
HEAD OF PAID MEDIA

"Measurement and data accuracy are still for me the one single thing you will need to know. Without it how can we make decisions or understand the impact. What is the benchmark or baseline and what levers are you pulling to change it."



JOSH MARINARO
PAID MEDIA DIRECTOR

"Specific search terms are less important than ever. Intent and showing to the right audience at the right time is where success is."



HARRY DUNN
PAID MEDIA MANAGER

"Think about how your ads accounts are structured. Given everything you now know, are you set up for success? Just because it's worked for so long, will it work through the AI revolution?"



JON BREEDS
PAID MEDIA MANAGER

"Don't sleep on YouTube. The audience is there. Put effort into your creative – run it past people, make sure it resonates – and match that with the right placement. Think about what people's motivations are around your product. Get the balance right between these things and you can maintain your ad presence."

8. LEARN FROM THE MASTERS

Launch's expert teams have shared their hot takes on these major shifts across Google ads and how CMOs can take advantage.



IAN LEWIS

HEAD OF DATA AND ANALYTICS

"As AI scales, the real competitive edge shifts entirely to your foundation: data and measurement. If you feed models junk data, you'll get highly efficient junk outputs. The ultimate goal isn't just adopting AI, it's building the robust measurement frameworks required to accurately prove its true business impact.

Bad Data = Bad Everything!"



JOE JOHNSTON

HEAD OF EXPERIMENTATION

"AI platforms (e.g. Gemini) aren't replacing search but becoming a parallel habit. But people use them for different purposes. AI dominates the upper-funnel discovery phase, when users seek inspiration. As consumers move toward purchase, usage shifts back to traditional search engines.

If brands aren't present in the initial AI discovery phase, they risk missing out in the later high-intent phases."



LUKE HILL

PAID MEDIA DIRECTOR

"Search isn't dead; the way you think it works is. First to mind, first to search. The search bar hasn't changed, just the way people use it has. Search, social, and LLMs are now conversational discovery engines and credibility and validation checkpoints.

Digital marketing in 2026 isn't just about capturing demand. It's about building and influencing the mindshare that triggers the search in the first place. Now more than ever, clean data and connected channel strategy are your edge."



SOPHIE WILLIAMS

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

"After 10+ years in paid media, I remember when DSA's launched. We called AI machine learning back then.

AI isn't a revolution, it's the next evolution. The message for brands is clear: invest in complete measurement, feed AI your best first-party data, focus on MER and blended business outcomes, make creative and amplifying your message your biggest competitive advantage.

Do you know how many of your target market you actually reached last year?"

USEFUL RESOURCES



HOW TO GUIDES

[The CMO's 2026 Guide to Shopping Feeds](#)

How to configure your feeds for growth in the age of AI.

[The Google Shopping Foundations every scaling e-commerce brand should have](#)

Learn how unifying feeds for paid search and organic can fuel growth.

TALKS

[How to prepare now for Google's AI Search Hitting your Pipeline](#)

A tactical 30 minute session on how to adapt your strategy to the conversational search landscape

[The Future of Paid Media](#)

Launch's Account Directors help marketing leaders prepare for the shift to AI fuelled search.

CASE STUDIES

[Galleries Lafayette & Grid Dynamics](#)

Integrating Vertex AI Search for Commerce led directly to a 7% revenue uplift.

[Albertsons Companies \("Ask AI"\)](#)

Albertsons established that over 85% of customer interactions started with open-ended/exploratory questions.

Launch!

POWERED BY HAPPINESS™

Anyone can run ads. But operating a paid media function successfully, at scale, with confidence that you'll be able to justify every pound of spend under board-level scrutiny? That's a whole different game.

It's the one that Launch is built for. We combine audience insight, creative strategy, accurate measurement, and structured experimentation **to deliver performance marketing strategies built for long-term growth, and campaigns that truly deliver.**

And it's delivered by a team Powered by Happiness™. We believe that when people are happy, they do great work. You can see it in the way our teams build partnerships, in the care they take with clients, and in the fun we have along the way. **That's how we deliver stronger results.**





JAYE COWLE

**CEO & FOUNDER
AT LAUNCH**

NEED A HAND?

As your trusted performance agency, we go beyond managing your ads to owning your growth.

Our seven levers of growth unite media, experimentation, and data to solve the plateau scaling brands often hit.

By looking at the full picture—from creative to conversion—we provide the strategic clarity needed to drive measurable impact.

Get the conversation started with our founder, Jaye Cowle, to see how we can fuel your next phase of growth.
jaye@launchonline.co.uk



PAID SEARCH

Winner – Drum Awards
2025



AGENCY OF THE YEAR

Winner – Performance
Marketing Awards 2026



PERFORMANCE

Winner – Drum Awards
2024



BEST USE OF SEARCH

Shortlisted
Global Search Awards
2026



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