

From guesswork to greatness:

How marketers are redefining effective
creative at scale in digital advertising

Introduction

In advertising, creative has always been a powerful lever for differentiation and growth. But in programmatic, it hasn't historically been fully leveraged in the same way as data or efficiency. Now, as digital ad budgets come under pressure and marketers are asked to do more with less while driving performance across every part of the funnel, that's changing.

Creative is emerging as that same powerful lever in programmatic—yet many teams still lack consensus on what makes creative stand out, and how to scale it across expanding digital formats without sacrificing clarity or control.

This report, based on a survey of 164 brand- and agency-side marketers, explores how marketers are approaching creative effectiveness, the methods they use to measure performance, and the tools that can help scale impact and drive meaningful results.

Key survey findings:



▶ Teams agree on creative's importance, but lack a unified definition.

Though 83.5% of marketers say creative drives advertising performance, only 58.5% report a shared understanding of what defines quality creative.



▶ Marketers struggle to scale creative effectively.

Limited asset updates (54.3%) and insufficient creative versions (51.8%) are the top causes for underperformance in programmatic campaigns, according to survey respondents. Nearly half (43.9%) say overreliance on a single format reduces creative effectiveness.



▶ Measurement is a priority, but gaps persist.

While 71.3% of marketers say creative evaluation has grown more important, just 58.5% regularly connect creative quality to performance—and only 51.2% have reliable metrics or dashboards to do so. As demand for data-driven insights grows, 73.2% expect data analysis to play a greater role in creative success.



▶ AI is reshaping creative workflows, not just output.

Marketers are already turning to AI to generate ad copy (50%), generate images/video (37.8%), and ensure contextual content alignment (29.3%). Nearly 55% expect workflow automation to be AI's biggest contribution over the next two years, signaling a shift toward operational efficiency that supports strategic creativity.

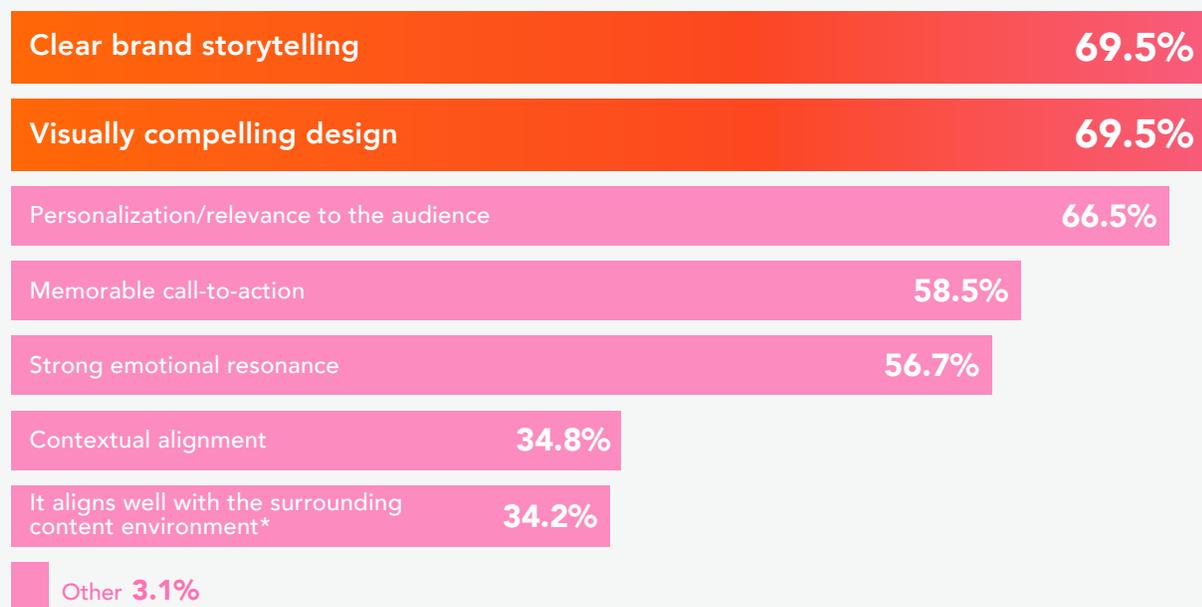
Creative is crucial but consensus is lacking

Though a majority (**83.5%**) of marketers agree that creative is a top driver of advertising performance, only **58.5%** say their teams share a clear definition of what “great creative” means, according to a new survey by EMARKETER and TripleLift.

“True creative excellence remains elusive because we lack a shared language and common metrics,” said Toccara Baker, vice president of marketing at TripleLift. “Every organization has its own definition, and despite attempts to establish industry standards, widespread adoption is slow.”

When asked to define “great creative,” **clear brand storytelling (69.5%)** and **visually compelling design (69.5%)** were the most cited attributes, per the EMARKETER and TripleLift survey.

Which attributes best describe “great creative” today?



*like a pet food ad on an animal shelter blog. Note: Respondents were allowed to select all that apply, but limited to 5. n=164. Source: EMARKETER and TripleLift “Programmatic Creative Effectiveness Survey” June 2025

Personalization/relevance to the audience (**66.5%**) was also ranked as important, highlighting the need for effective audience segmentation and targeting.

- Audience segmentation is the ad tech category with the biggest impact on creative effectiveness, according to 29.9% of survey respondents.
- US marketers believe that targeting contributes more toward driving sales than brand, creative, reach, and recency, according to Advertiser Perceptions.
- **Headline and copy can impact brand recall by over 60% if implemented purposefully for the target audience,** according to TripleLift's Native Best Practice Guide.

Despite alignment with surrounding content and contextual relevance being the lowest ranked attributes of "great creative," contextual targeting solutions were listed among the top three ad tech categories that have the biggest impact on creative effectiveness, per the EMARKETER and TripleLift survey.

This illustrates a disconnect between marketers' thoughts and actions.

- Though contextual relevance may not be top-of-mind during creative conceptualization, it's still an incredibly important part of the process.
- "As we move closer to an era of hyper-personalization, brands are being forced to think totally differently about how they approach the creative side of their advertising operations," said Max Willens, senior analyst at EMARKETER. "Creative assets need to be more portable, more relevant, and more dynamic than they've ever been."

The absence of shared standards around what constitutes great creative doesn't just hinder collaboration—it reveals a larger opportunity. Marketers are recognizing the need for smarter systems that can bridge creative ambition with operational efficiency.

29.9%

of survey respondents say audience segmentation is the ad tech category with the biggest impact on creative effectiveness.

Establishing shared frameworks—and leveraging technology that can translate creative inputs into scalable, adaptable outputs—will be key to closing the gap between vision and execution, enabling teams to move faster and align more effectively across channels.

Marketers lack the infrastructure to scale creative

Reaching consumers across an increasingly complex digital landscape requires marketers to deploy campaigns across multiple channels and platforms.

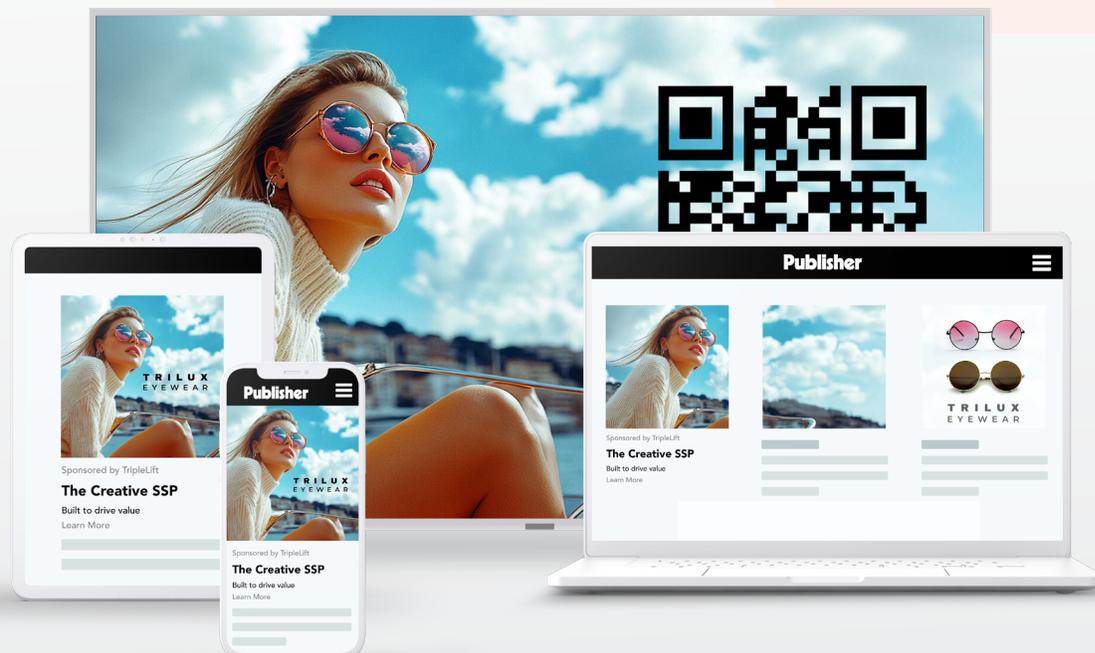
- Online video (79.9%), display (77.4%), and native (66.5%) are currently the top formats used in programmatic or digital advertising, per the EMARKETER and TripleLift survey.
- Connected TV (CTV) is the least used format, activated by 50.0% of respondents, but it's likely to grow fast as US viewership rises.

However, video, display, and CTV are all delivered in very different consumer contexts, according to Baker.



“Creative asset sizes are unique for each channel and adapting them to deliver high-quality ad experiences requires advanced data, creative, and rendering capabilities,”

—Toccaro Baker, Vice President of Marketing at TripleLift



Despite marketers' desire to deliver relevant creative across each of these channels, many lack the infrastructure to do so, creating a creative supply chain gap that leads to underperforming creative.

- **43.9%** of marketers say reliance on a single format can lead to bad creative effectiveness or performance.
- Over half (**54.3%**) of marketers say the reason creative in programmatic campaigns most often falls short is because the assets aren't updated frequently enough.
- **51.8%** say they don't produce enough versions for different audiences, contexts, or formats.

Where do you believe creative in programmatic campaigns most often fall short of its potential, and why?

54.3%

Assets aren't updated frequently enough, leading to fatigue and declining performance.

51.8%

We don't produce enough versions to match different audiences, contexts, or formats.

51.2%

We lack reliable metrics or dashboards to tie creative attributes to outcomes.

43.9%

Insufficient funds or talent for testing, production, or tool licensing.

37.2%

Audience or product-feed data are incomplete/inaccurate, so dynamic elements miss the mark.

23.8%

The web or TV environment that the creative runs in is not conducive for performance.

14.0%

DCO/ad-builder templates restrict design freedom or brand expression.

Note: Respondents were allowed to select up to 4.
n=164. Source: EMARKETER and TripleLift
"Programmatic Creative Effectiveness Survey" June 2025



“To truly elevate our output, we must grasp the technical capabilities of today’s digital formats. While advertisers and agencies own the messaging, the key is choosing the right format for the right goal. Ultimately, aligning on creative standards means understanding what brands want to achieve. Once we know the desired outcome, we can craft the perfect message and format.”

—Ed Dinichert, chief revenue officer at TripleLift

To achieve quality creative at scale, marketers must fundamentally rethink how work gets done—moving beyond traditional, linear processes toward more agile, tech-enabled workflows. Leveraging AI can streamline production, reduce bottlenecks, and ensure consistency across channels, while third-party partnerships can provide specialized capabilities or content volume that internal teams may lack.

MIND THE GAP: Creative priorities differ across the aisle

When it comes to generating, activating, and measuring creative, there are a few key differences between agencies and brands.

▶ **Making vs. maximizing:**

Brands are significantly more likely than agencies to see AI making the biggest positive difference in asset production, while agencies see it positively impacting performance optimization.

▶ **Measuring up:**

Agencies are significantly more likely than brands to use ad server creative reports to measure performance and brand-lift metrics like awareness and recall as KPIs.

▶ **Looking ahead:**

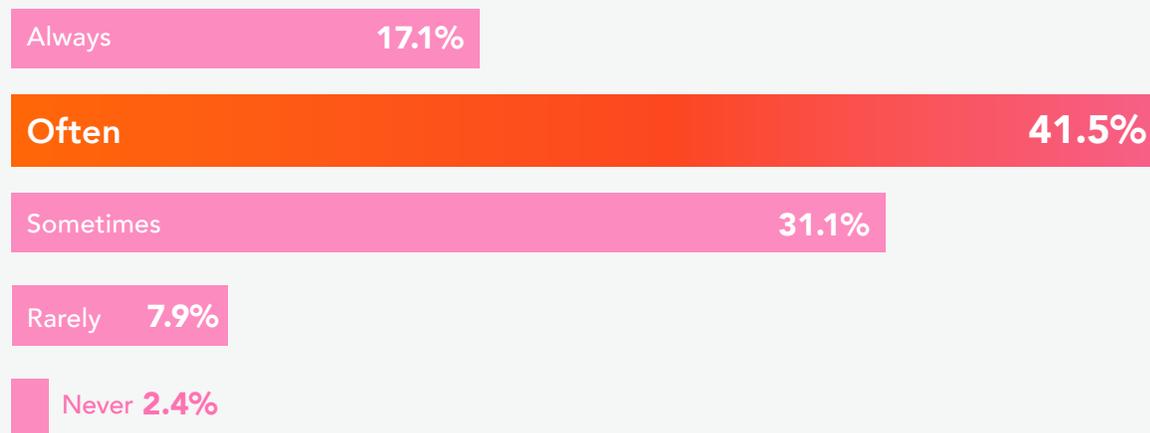
Brands are more likely to say creative strategy and concepting and in-house production will become more important in the next phase of creative. But agencies are more likely to believe collaboration with retail media networks (RMNs) will play a bigger role.

When creative isn't measured, opportunities are missed

71.3% of marketers say evaluating or improving creative effectiveness has become more important over the past year.

Despite this shift, only **58.5%** of marketers regularly tie creative quality to performance metrics and just over half (**51.2%**) lack reliable metrics or dashboards to track creative effectiveness.

How often does your team directly correlate creative quality with campaign performance metrics?



n=164. Source: EMARKETER and TripleLift "Programmatic Creative Effectiveness Survey" June 2025

"Creative performance should never be isolated from business performance," said Giuseppe Pescechera, head of growth at Remazing, a TripleLift client.

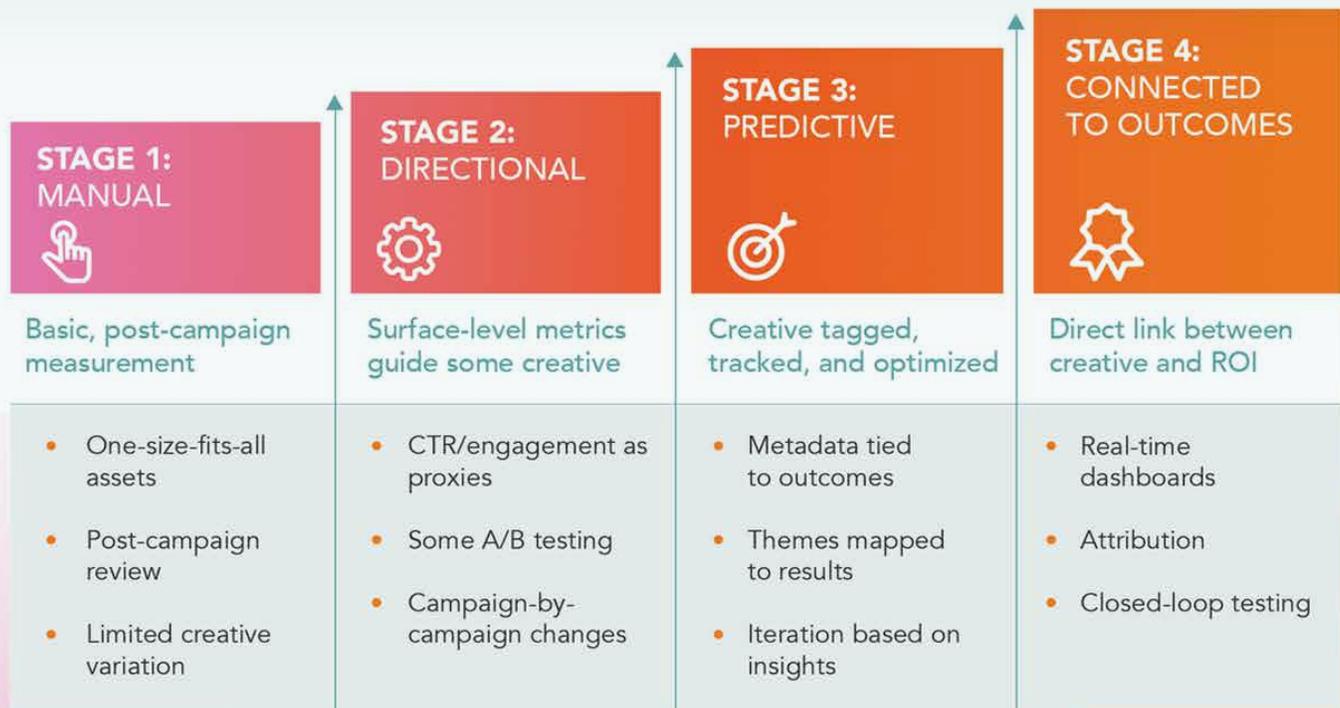
"We often connect the dots by structuring creative tests within controlled campaign environments, where shifts in CTR, video completion rate, or engagement correlate directly with changes in conversion or ROI. It's about turning creative KPIs into directional signals that inform investment decisions."

The goal is to create a “powerful, but measurable” engine for business growth, according to Chanelle Urquico, international DSP engagement lead at TripleLift.

- By investing in audience insights upfront and fostering a culture of continuous experimentation and learning, marketers can gain insights into the impact between creative, media, and sales.
- To take it to the next level, marketers can build a holistic attribution framework to prove the tangible ROI of every creative test.

THE CREATIVE ANALYTICS MATURITY MODEL

How marketers evolve from basic measurement to strategic creative intelligence



While creative can be a driver of performance, a majority (62.2%) of marketers don't believe campaign outcomes can be attributed to creative alone, per the EMARKETER and TripleLift survey.

This underscores the need for multifactor attribution that includes targeting, media mix, and context—alongside creative quality.

Morris also suggested bringing everything together in unified dashboards to help combine creative analytics with media performance and conversion data, making it easier to see which creative attributes actually drive ROI.

To fully realize creative's impact, measurement must move from reactive reporting to real-time insight. That means linking creative signals to business outcomes, investing in smarter audience understanding, and building feedback loops that guide optimization.



"The key is to close the loop between creative diagnostics and outcome metrics. That means going beyond last-touch attribution by using incrementality testing to measure creative impact through controlled experiments."

— Izzy Morris, paid social and programmatic lead at Vodafone, a TripleLift client.

CREATIVE CONNECTIONS: What a difference "often" makes

How frequently marketers link creative quality with campaign metrics doesn't just reflect a mindset—it predicts action.

Marketers who often make that connection are significantly more likely than their sometimes-connecting peers to say their organization has a clear definition of great creative—and they're over four times more likely to strongly agree.

But the split runs deeper:

▶ **Data-driven refreshing:**

Those in the "sometimes" camp are more likely to disagree that their team regularly refreshes creative based on performance insights. In contrast, "often" marketers are leaning into iteration.

▶ **AI vs. experience:**

Marketers who sometimes link creative to metrics are three times more likely to believe proprietary AI/ML models drive creative effectiveness—hinting they may seek shortcuts where stronger frameworks are absent.

▶ **Retail media mindsets:**

"Often" connectors are more likely to say RMN partnerships will grow in importance—suggesting a forward-looking, omnichannel creative strategy.

AI is revolutionizing the creative process—not just the output

Already, marketers have embraced AI across a range of creative tasks.

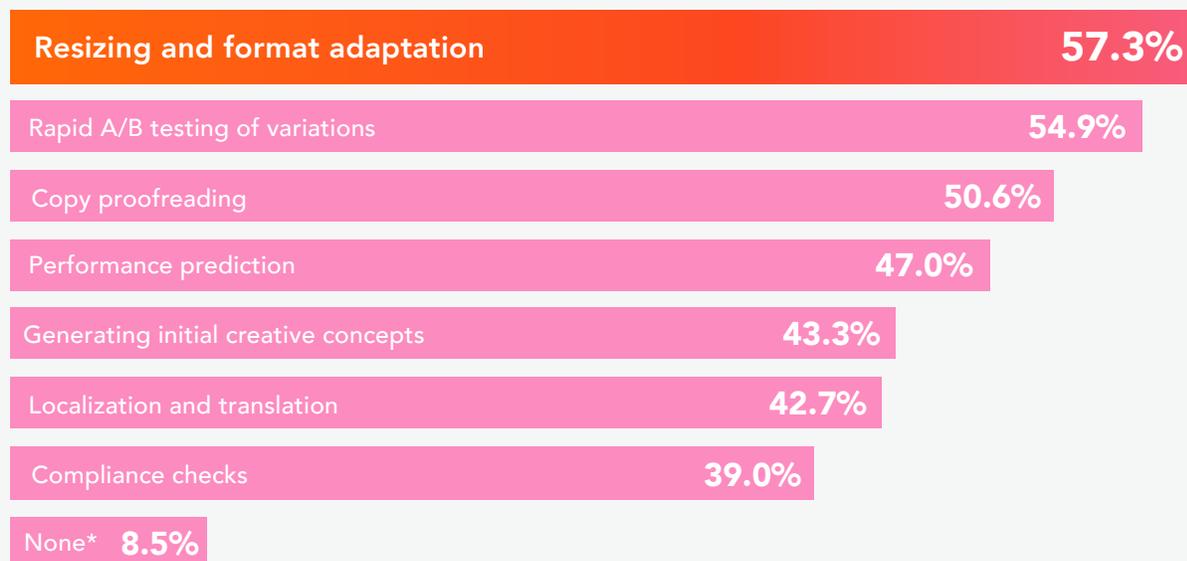
- Half of marketers are currently using AI to generate ad copy.
- AI is also used to **generate images/video (37.8%)**, **ensure contextual content alignment (29.3%)**, and **version/resize assets (26.2%)**.



“If marketers want AI to deliver an exponential, rather than linear increase in productivity, they will need to feel comfortable integrating it into multiple steps of the creative production process. That will require a significant revision to how brands and agencies approach that process.”

— Max Willens, senior analyst, EMARKETER

Which of the following creative tasks would you gladly offload to technology/AI?



*prefer human oversight. Note: Respondents were allowed to select all that apply. n=164. Source: EMARKETER and TripleLift “Programmatic Creative Effectiveness Survey” June 2025

Marketers are especially eager to delegate repetitive, time-consuming tasks to AI, freeing them for more strategic work.

57.3%

of marketers would gladly offload resizing and format adaptation to technology/AI.

54.9%

want help with rapid A/B testing of variations.

50.6%

would like AI to proofread copy.

“As generative AI tools become more sophisticated they foster greater confidence,” said Baker. “This is crucial for their integration into the established structures and workflows that brands rely upon. The ‘stickiness’ of these solutions hinges on their demonstrable effectiveness and the consistent delivery of high-quality outputs.”

AI is rapidly emerging as a force multiplier in marketing, empowering teams to elevate strategic creativity by offloading repeatable, time-consuming tasks.

- By automating workflows, optimizing performance in real time, and surfacing actionable insights, AI creates more room for marketers to focus on high-impact creative thinking and storytelling.
- In fact, over the next two years, **more than half of marketers (54.9%) expect AI to drive the greatest impact in workflow automation, followed by performance optimization (48.2%) and insights and reporting (43.3%).**
- This shift signals a transformation where AI doesn’t replace creativity—it supercharges it.

Marketers who integrate AI into the core of their creative operations—not just for asset generation, but for workflows, testing, and adaptation—will unlock new levels of agility. The future lies in systems that balance automation with human creativity.

DEFINING THE BLUEPRINT: Strategies for smarter creative

To help their organizations evolve, marketers can lead by focusing on four key strategies.

1

▶ Establish creative standards.

Align cross-functional teams on what “great” looks like, including visual, verbal, and strategic benchmarks.

“It boils down to having a really effective source of truth: a comprehensive and actionable brand guideline,” said Urquico. “It’s not just about logos and colors; it’s about standardizing the brand’s strategic vision, values, and distinct voice. Having this key resource for everyone to build on is key for ensuring creatives remain high standard and true to an advertiser’s voice.”

- Clickthrough rate is the top KPI for judging creative effectiveness, used by over two-thirds (67.1%) of respondents. Engagement rate (59.8%) and conversion rate (57.3%) are also popular KPIs.
- Nearly half (48.8%) of marketers believe the media and entertainment vertical leads in creative innovation, followed by retail and ecommerce (45.7%) and technology (36.6%).

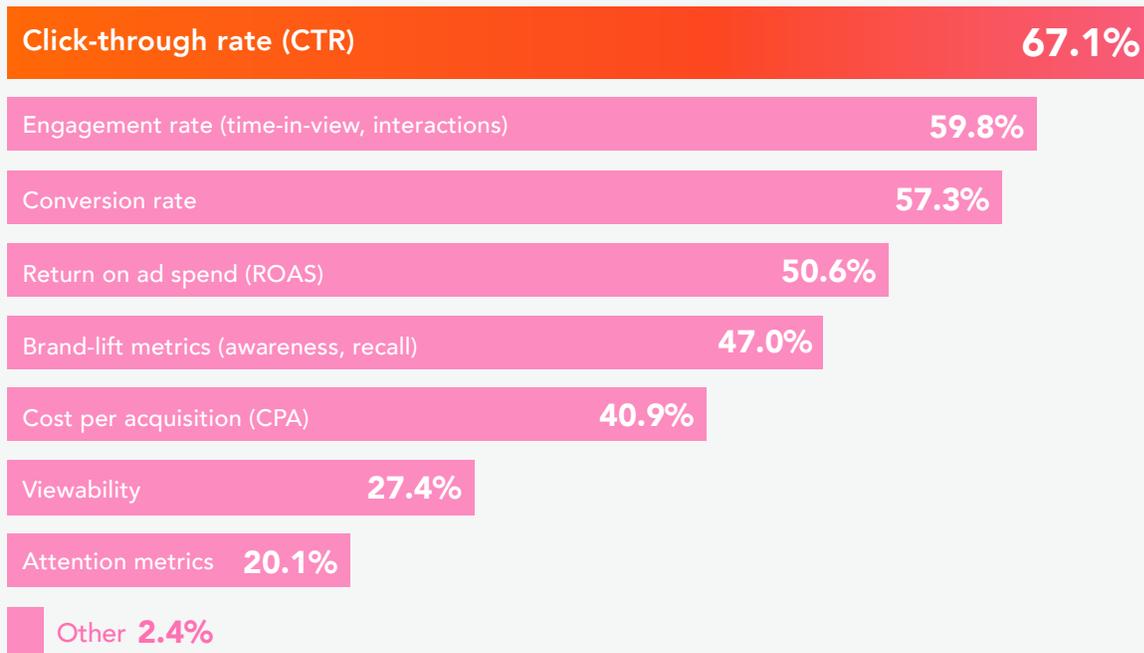
2

▶ Leverage AI for efficiency and scale.

Use AI for rapid versioning and testing, while keeping final creative polish in human hands.

“AI has the opportunity to supercharge advertiser’s ability to deliver tailored messages,” said Urquico. “However, the biggest risk is brand dilution and a loss of authentic human connection. Without the careful human eye, AI could churn out generic or off-brand content that breaks trust.”

Which KPIs do you use most often to judge creative effectiveness in digital advertising campaigns?



Note: Respondents were allowed to select all that apply.
n=164. Source: EMARKETER and TripleLift "Programmatic Creative Effectiveness Survey" June 2025

3 ▶ Invest in creative analytics.

Tag assets with metadata and connect them to performance dashboards to create a continuous learning loop for optimization.

"Currently, many advertisers use a single creative without rich metadata—it doesn't tell us if the creative features a specific character, brand, price, or promotion," said Dinichert. "The future will bring the rise of creative metadata, offering a much deeper understanding."

- To attract marketers, ad platforms should prioritize better tools—**41%** of small and medium-sized business decision-makers in Brazil, the UK, and the US say better creative tools would convince them to advertise on a new platform, while **36%** say the same about improved analytics, according to October 2024 data from National Research Group (NRG).

4

▶ **Treat creative as a strategic lever.**

Creative should be designed with KPIs in mind, from upper-funnel awareness to lower-funnel conversion.

“Start treating creative as the brand business model in action,” said Pescechera. “If it doesn’t articulate what the brand solves, why it matters to the audience, and why now, it’s not strategic.”

Marketers can do this by connecting creative directly to customer moments that matter.

90.9%

of marketers believe human intuition/involvement in evaluating or generating AI-generated creative is very important or critical, per the EMARKETER and TripleLift survey.



“The idea is to build creative roadmaps, not just asset libraries.”

— Giuseppe Pescechera, Head of Growth at Remazing, a TripleLift client.

Designing smarter creative isn’t just about producing more, it’s about creating with purpose. By aligning teams on standards, investing in tools that scale with control, and connecting creative to clear performance outcomes, marketers can build systems that deliver better results, more consistently, across every screen.

About the survey

This survey was developed and fielded by EMARKETER in collaboration with TripleLift in June 2025.

We surveyed 164 US marketing professionals to assess their attitudes toward creative in programmatic advertising.

About this report

Research for this report was compiled by members of the EMARKETER Studio team in partnership with TripleLift, using reports, forecasts, and research by EMARKETER on creative tools and performance conducted in June and July 2025.

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Giuseppe Pescechera, Head of Growth, Remazing

Chanelle Urquico, International DSP Engagement Lead, TripleLift

Max Willens, Senior Analyst, EMARKETER



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