

Wunderkind

Publisher State of the Union 2025

September 2025



Executive Summary:

Balancing Revenue, Relevance, and Reader Trust

The 2025 Publisher State of the Union [reveals an industry at a pivotal moment](#), navigating the phase-out of third-party cookies, adapting to generative AI, and pursuing sustainable revenue models without compromising user experience. Across every level and role, publishers are [reevaluating how they engage audiences, monetize effectively, and future-proof their businesses](#).

Direct monetization strategies are gaining strength, with subscriptions and branded content cited as top revenue drivers. Yet, ad revenue remains a cornerstone, with 80% of respondents increasing ad density, despite widespread concerns about user experience. Notably, while most publishers acknowledge the risks of over-monetization, few have adopted advanced UX-friendly ad strategies.

AI adoption is growing, but fragmented. While 30% are using AI for optimization, and 32% are exploring new formats, just a small fraction have fully integrated AI into workflows. Similarly, only 14% report mature first-party data strategies, even as identity and personalization become critical in a cookieless future.

Email remains a powerful, underutilized channel, 84% say it's important, but only 18% actively personalize content. Newsletter strategies often prioritize ad revenue and subscriptions, but deeper audience engagement lags. Meanwhile, [just 12% of publishers say they can identify more than 25% of their visitors, limiting both monetization and personalization potential](#).

Operational strain is evident: 34% report resource constraints are a growing challenge, while 56% cite difficulties unifying data across platforms. Though cross-functional collaboration is improving, few organizations have achieved true integration across departments.

Ultimately, the data shows [an industry striving to shift from volume to value](#), from generic tactics to more targeted, identity-driven strategies. Publishers who invest in personalization, identity resolution, and seamless user journeys, while balancing monetization with trust—will be best positioned for long-term growth.

The takeaway: Future-ready publishers are those that unify their audience data, activate it intelligently, and deliver relevant, respectful experiences across every channel, whether through ads, email, or content. [In a shifting landscape, relevance and recognition are the new reach.](#)

This report takes a pulse check on the publishing industry at a moment of rapid change. It digs into how media companies are balancing growth with user experience, navigating the end of third-party cookies, and adapting to the rise of generative AI.

From monetization models and tech investments to data readiness and audience strategies, it reveals where publishers are aligned, and where gaps remain. By breaking down responses across roles and job levels, the report surfaces the strategies gaining traction, the ones falling short, and the emerging priorities shaping the next era of digital publishing.

It is based on survey data collected between in July 2025, from 50 U.S. and UK-based publishers, evenly split across job roles and job levels.

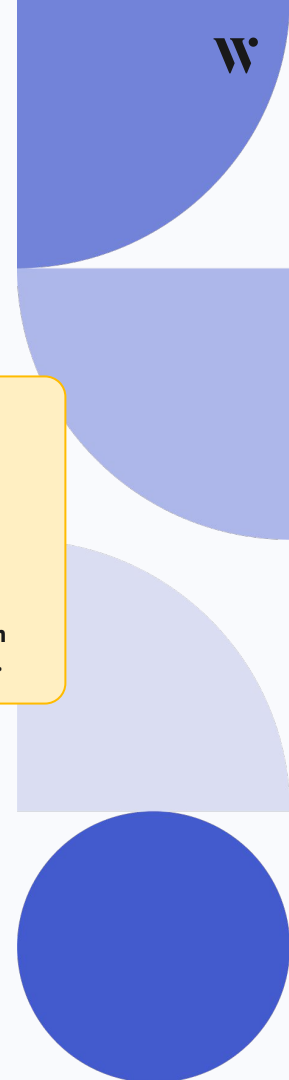
Monetization Mix:

Subscriptions and Sponsorships Dominate

The monetization landscape remains anchored in direct reader revenue and branded partnerships. **Subscriptions (70%) and branded content (72%) dominate monetization strategies**, with near-universal adoption among revenue and C-Suite leaders. Programmatic advertising remains strong at 62% overall but drops to 40% among executives, highlighting a gap between leadership priorities and tactical execution—particularly as product/UX teams report higher programmatic usage (86%).

Editorial favors branded content (73%) over programmatic (45%), while ad ops use both. **Affiliate and commerce content is underused at 30%—and entirely overlooked by revenue leaders (0%).**

With subscriptions and branded content saturating publisher strategies, the next wave of growth lies in eCommerce—especially when paired with identity-driven personalization. Publishers should treat eCommerce not as an add-on, but as a core pillar of revenue strategy, leveraging behavioral signals and moment-based delivery (as used by platforms like Amazon and Instagram) to match intent with value, without sacrificing UX.



72%

**Branded content /
Sponsorships are the
dominant monetization
method across roles, with
total buy-in from C-Suite.**

Revenue Growth Outlook:

Direct and Programmatic Paths Diverge

When asked about the biggest revenue growth opportunity in the next 12–24 months, responses point to a bifurcation in strategy. **Programmatic advertising leads overall at 36%, driven heavily by managers (50%) and ad ops roles (50%),** reinforcing its importance in execution layers of the business. Meanwhile, DTC revenue is a close second at 34%, with overwhelming support from VPs (62%) and revenue leaders (50%). Audience development professionals also lean into DTC (46%), aligning with their mandate to grow loyal, monetizable audiences. Interestingly, C-Suite respondents were less bullish on both routes (20% for each), suggesting either diversified priorities or lingering uncertainty.

Branded content trails behind at just 20%, despite its strong current usage. Affiliate sales, content licensing, and social monetization all ranked below 6%, signaling low confidence in these emerging or niche formats.

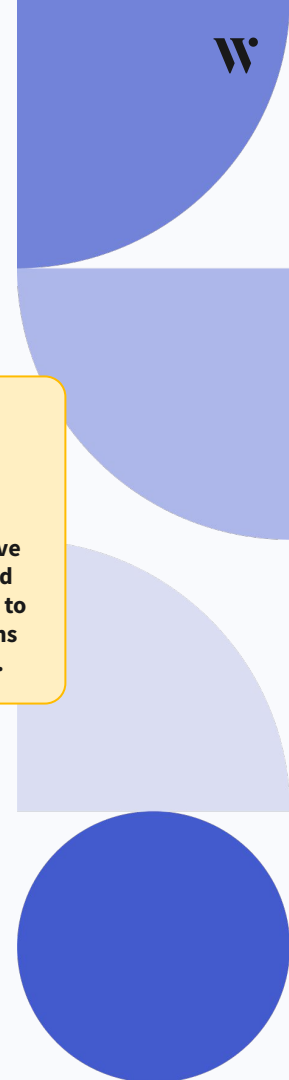
The data reveals a strategic split—execution-focused roles like Ad Ops and Managers prioritize scalable programmatic revenue, while VPs and revenue leaders are doubling down on DTC models. This signals a maturing market where scale alone is no longer enough; owning the audience relationship is becoming the defining advantage. The most resilient publishers will blend both: using programmatic for volume and reach, while layering in identity-driven tactics to grow lifetime value. Leaders should think beyond channel silos and design monetization ecosystems where every visit drives either revenue or recognition.

State of Preparedness for Cookie Depreciation:

A False Sense of Readiness

While 38% of publishers say they've made solid progress toward life after third-party cookies, **only 14% report having strong first-party data and identity strategies in place**. This gap between confidence and capability is alarming with Chrome's phase-out nearing. VPs (50%) and Editorial (45%) are more likely to report active implementation, but even in these groups, full readiness is rare. **Meanwhile, 36% are still evaluating solutions, and 10% admit they are unprepared, rising to 50% of Ad Ops**, the group closest to technical execution.

True readiness for a cookieless future requires more than a roadmap—it demands operational change, aligned teams, and a mature tech stack. Publishers must evolve from basic first-party data collection to systems that enable persistent identity, privacy-safe targeting, and cross-channel activation. Investing in scalable identity resolution, behavioral segmentation, and consent-forward UX will be essential. Those who lead with trust and personalization will be best positioned to drive revenue and long-term audience loyalty as addressability declines.



14%

Just 14% of publishers have strong first-party data and identity strategies in place to combat privacy regulations and cookie depreciation.

First-Party Data:

A Key Strategic Priority, but Implementation Lags

More than half of publishers (54%) say they recognize the importance of first-party data but are still in the early stages of implementation, indicating that while intent exists, execution is lagging. Managers (67%) and Directors (47%) lead, signaling that middle management is pushing for foundational data strategies. Merely 26% of respondents say that first-party data is already a strategic priority with active investment, and just 6% claim mature activation strategies are in place—underscoring how rare full readiness still is.

Job-level and functional splits expose further gaps. The C-Suite is the most bullish, with 60% reporting early-stage engagement and 40% claiming first-party data is already a strategic priority. In contrast, Ad Ops is notably behind: 75% say first-party data is not yet a focus. Revenue and Product/UX teams are split, some advancing, others stalled, while Editorial and Audience Development sit near the average, showing broad, but uneven momentum across the organization.

Treating first-party data as a project rather than a strategic pillar is a missed opportunity. Publishers that lead with first-party infrastructure, from permissioned identity to true-personalization, create a durable advantage in both monetization and user experience. As third-party signals vanish, the ability to activate consented data in real-time will define success. Leadership should frame first-party investment not as a privacy response, but as a competitive moat to drive relevance, retention, and revenue.

AI Adoption Gains Steady Momentum:

Experimentation High, but Strategic Direction Elusive

AI adoption in publishing is growing but remains fragmented. Only 30% of respondents report using AI for content optimization and personalization, with strong uptake among VPs (62%) and revenue leaders (50%). Another 32% are exploring new formats such as interactive content, especially C-Suite leaders, 60% of whom are leaning into experimentation. Additionally, 20% of executives are testing AI-generated outputs like headlines and summaries.

However, 22% of publishers aren't using AI at all. This jumps to 75% in Ad Ops and 43% in Product/UX—execution-focused roles less involved in content strategy. Managers (33%) also lag in adoption. Editorial and Audience Development teams are leading usage, tied closely to content performance and audience growth.

AI is shifting from hype to utility, but adoption needs direction. Publishers should move beyond experimentation and align AI use with measurable outcomes: improving personalization, streamlining production, and enhancing user experience. The most successful models will pair machine-driven insights with human editorial oversight to protect brand voice while scaling content.



22%

Almost a quarter of publishers are not leveraging AI for content creation and distribution.

Generative AI's Impact on Web Traffic:

Most Publishers Have Concerns

Generative AI's influence on publisher traffic is generating concern across roles. Half of respondents (50%) are moderately concerned and exploring mitigation strategies—particularly Audience Development (77%) and Editorial (55%), whose success is tightly tied to traffic. Managers (39%) and Product/UX (43%) are also active, showing that the issue spans strategy and execution.

Still, 34% remain only mildly concerned, and 16% report no concern. Notably, 60% of C-Suite respondents fall into the mildly concerned category, suggesting a disconnect between executive perception and frontline urgency. Meanwhile, 0% of Ad Ops and Revenue roles say they are unconcerned.

As AI-generated summaries replace clicks, publishers must shift from reliance on search to loyalty-driven models. This is a moment for proactive reinvention. Prioritize unique content, deepen direct relationships, and invest in owned channels like newsletters and apps. In an AI-first world, brand memory and user trust—not just visibility—will drive resilience and revenue.



50%

Half of publishers are moderately concerned about generative AI reducing website traffic.

Strategies to Mitigate Traffic Loss:

Increasing Audience Engagement and Unique Content

In response to growing concern over generative AI siphoning search traffic, publishers are taking a multifaceted approach, but adoption remains uneven. **The most common tactic is increasing direct audience engagement (52%)**, especially among Audience Development (69%), Editorial (50%), and C-Suite leaders (80%). This signals a strategic pivot toward owned channels. **Focusing on unique, exclusive, or proprietary content ranks second at 44%**, led by Audience Development (62%), VPs (50%), and C-Suite (60%)—all of whom recognize that differentiated journalism is the best defense against commodification.

Other mitigation efforts are far less prevalent. **Only 18% are exploring content licensing agreements with AI companies, and just 6% are using Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) to structure content for AI visibility.** Technical countermeasures like AI scraping restrictions are used by 30%, more frequently by VPs (50%) and Revenue roles (25%). Notably, 24% say they aren't taking any action—jumping to 75% in Ad Ops and 43% in Product/UX—raising red flags about readiness in critical operational roles.

Most publishers are reacting with defensible but limited strategies. To lead in an AI-mediated landscape, they must go further: adopt structured data to gain citation in AI summaries, invest in proprietary content that resists replication, and build resilient communities around newsletters and subscriptions. This moment demands innovation—not just insulation.


The Role of Social Media:

Important, but not Dominant

Social media remains an important pillar of publisher strategy, however **only 12% of respondents describe it as “critically important” to their business.** Almost half (46%) say it is “very important”, particularly among VPs (62%), revenue teams (50%), and editorial roles (43%). This suggests that while social remains a strong distribution and awareness channel, it’s not viewed as the primary engine for growth.

A significant 42% say it is “moderately important”—used mainly for content distribution, not core business outcomes. This view is shared across multiple roles including Product/UX (57%) and Ad Ops (50%). Among C-Suite leaders, opinions are more evenly split, with 40% rating social as very important and 40% as moderately important.

As social platforms shift algorithms and users move away from platforms like Facebook and X, the reduction in referral traffic requires publishers to recalibrate how they define value in social. Rather than relying solely on reach, smart publishers are treating social as a loyalty and engagement engine, deepening connections through community, creators, and owned touchpoints.



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58%

Well over half of publishers state that social media is “very” or “critically important” to their overall business strategy.

Primary Social Media Goals:

Increasing Reach and Driving Traffic

Publishers are using social media to support multiple business goals, but the emphasis remains on top-of-funnel outcomes. [Increasing brand awareness and reach leads at 80% overall](#), with full alignment among Ad Ops and 100% of Editorial and Product/UX roles. Closely behind is [driving traffic to websites and apps \(70%\)](#), especially important to Ad Ops (100%), Editorial (77%), and C-Suite (80%), groups for whom traffic volume remains key to monetization and content visibility.

[Building audience engagement and community \(52%\)](#) and [generating direct revenue \(40%\)](#) follow, with Audience Development showing the strongest lean-in to both (62% and 69%, respectively). [Notably, collecting first-party data ranks at 42% overall](#) and is highly prioritized by C-Suite (80%) and Revenue teams (75%), indicating growing alignment between social strategy and long-term monetization goals. Strategic focus varies: Editorial prioritizes reach and awareness, while Audience Development and Revenue teams emphasize outcomes like subscriptions, sign-ups, and revenue from social platforms.

The data signals a shift: social is no longer just a megaphone, it's becoming a bridge to owned experiences. Publishers should focus on converting fleeting social interactions into deeper relationships. This means using social to seed newsletter sign-ups, membership journeys, and habit-building behaviors that reduce reliance on platform algorithms, and put the publisher back in control.

Measuring Social Media Success:

Engagement, Reach, Traffic and Conversions

Engagement metrics, such as, Likes, shares, comments, and saves are the most commonly used success indicators, *cited by 76% overall and 100% of C-Suite respondents*. Editorial (86%) and Audience Development (77%) also heavily favor engagement, underscoring the importance of interaction as a signal of resonance and brand affinity. *Reach and impressions come next at 60%*, particularly valued by Editorial (71%) and C-Suite (80%), reflecting social's continued use as a top-of-funnel awareness tool.

Other metrics reflect a growing focus on tangible outcomes. *Website traffic is used by 56% overall*, led by Revenue (57%), Editorial (57%), and C-Suite (80%). *Conversion rates are tracked by 56% overall* and soar to 85% among Audience Development and 68% among Directors. *Direct revenue generated is still a niche KPI, used by just over a third (34%)*, though it's more common in monetization roles. Notably, *only 10% of respondents say they don't formally measure social performance*, with most of that group focused on brand presence alone.

Publishers should evolve from vanity metrics to value metrics. While engagement is useful, future-ready teams are connecting social activity to real business impact, like conversions, subscriptions, and retained audiences. Social's role should extend beyond awareness to measurable contribution in the revenue funnel. Invest in attribution models and testing strategies that capture the full path from impression to action.

Moving Beyond Traditional Advertising:

A Slow Move to Revenue Resilience

A strong majority of publishers are moving beyond traditional ad models. Nearly half (48%) say they are starting to explore new revenue streams, such as subscriptions, eCommerce, or events, with C-Suite (60%) and Revenue roles (75%) leading the charge. An additional 38% report they have successfully diversified and are seeing growth in new streams, most notably among Directors (53%), Editorial (45%), and Audience Development (46%). This suggests that diversification is gaining traction across both leadership and execution roles.

Only 10% of respondents say their focus remains primarily on advertising, with this view most common among Managers (17%) and Ad Ops (25%). Meanwhile, 4% claim to have a mature diversified strategy, though this remains rare and concentrated among high-performing revenue teams.

Diversification isn't just an option, it's a necessity. As ad markets fluctuate and platform risk intensifies, publishers should double down on building sustainable, multi-channel monetization strategies. From affiliate and commerce to memberships and events, the goal is to create revenue resilience. Leaders should treat each new stream not as a test, but as a pillar.



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4%

Just 4% of publishers have a mature diversified revenue strategy in place.

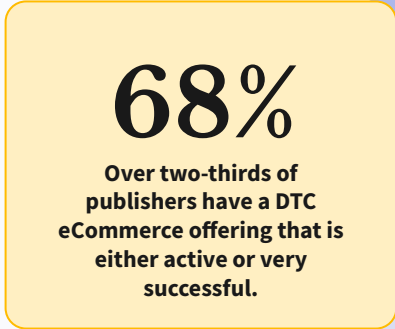

Adoption of eCommerce:

Publishers Are Leaning Into DTC

DTC eCommerce is gaining ground as a revenue channel, but adoption remains uneven. Nearly half of respondents (46%) say they have an offering in place, led by C-Suite (60%) and Revenue teams (75%). An additional 22% report that their eCommerce channel is already active and successful, most notably among Directors (37%) and Audience Development (23%). This indicates momentum is building, especially among those closest to revenue strategy and the customer.

However, many are still in exploratory mode. 14% say they want to pursue eCommerce but haven't started, and another 14% currently rely on affiliate-only models. A small but notable 4% say they have launched eCommerce but it's not yet successful, pointing to execution or performance hurdles.

DTC eCommerce presents a high-potential, low-disruption revenue stream, especially when built on existing content and audience trust. Publishers should integrate eCommerce where it adds value, not friction, using personalization and behavioral targeting to surface relevant products. With identity tools and on-site engagement tactics, Ecommerce can become a seamless extension of content, not a departure from it.



68%

Over two-thirds of publishers have a DTC eCommerce offering that is either active or very successful.

Stack Drivers of Engagement and Revenue:

Ad Platforms Lead, but Email and Identity Gain Ground

When asked which tools in their tech stack drive the most value for engagement and revenue, [ad platforms top the list at 74%](#), with [strong support from nearly every function](#), especially Product/UX (91%), Revenue (75%), and Editorial (82%). This underscores the continued importance of advertising infrastructure in funding content and capturing monetization opportunities.

[ESPs follow closely at 48%](#), with C-Suite (80%) and Revenue (75%) ranking them highly. This reflects the growing role of email in both retention and monetization. [CMS rank third at 66%](#), with consistent value across Editorial (64%), Audience Development (77%), and Ad Ops (75%). [CDPs \(42%\) and Analytics tools \(52%\)](#) also show strong utility, particularly for teams managing personalization and segmentation.

[Notably, identity solutions are cited by only 28%](#), though this climbs among Revenue (43%) and Product/UX (29%), suggesting that while few have deployed identity at scale, those who have see its value.

Publishers should view their tech stack not as individual tools, but as an integrated ecosystem. Identity, analytics, and email systems must work in concert to turn anonymous visitors into known users, and known users into loyal customers. High-value engagement depends on orchestrated tech—not isolated capabilities.

Must-Haves for 2025/26:

Subscriptions, AI and Personalization Take Center Stage

Looking ahead, publishers are rallying around technologies that fuel direct audience monetization and smarter content delivery. Subscription management platforms top the list, *cited by 68% of respondents, rising to 100% among Revenue leaders and 80% of C-Suite*. This reflects a clear shift toward reader revenue as a long-term growth engine.

AI is also climbing the priority ladder. *AI-powered content optimization tools are named by 56% overall*, with strong interest from Product/UX (59%) and the C-Suite (80%). *Paired with personalization engines (48%)*, it's clear that publishers are seeking scalable ways to deliver high-performing experiences. *Other critical tools include CDPs (56%) and advanced advertising tools (56%)*, pointing to a dual focus on data infrastructure and monetization. *Yet identity solutions are cited by only 12%*, a surprising oversight given the industry's declining addressability.

Future-ready publishers are using AI and personalization to shape content experiences, backed by robust subscription and data platforms. Winning strategies will center on creating value and delivering it intelligently, at scale.



100%

All Revenue leaders and 80% of C-Suite say a subscription management platform is a must-have for 2025/26.

Publisher Investments:

Ad Platforms and Subscription Tools Dominate Budgets

When it comes to financial investment, [ad platforms lead the pack, cited by 80% of respondents](#). This figure jumps to 100% among C-Suite and remains high across roles like Product/UX (91%) and Editorial (86%), underscoring how critical advertising infrastructure remains for monetization.

[Subscription management platforms follow closely at 64% overall](#), with especially strong support from Audience Development (100%) and C-Suite (80%). This aligns with broader industry momentum toward DTC revenue. [AI/ML tools are the third-largest area of investment at 54%](#), most notably among Directors (68%) and Product/UX (59%), reflecting a push to automate and personalize content at scale.

Interestingly, [CDPs rank at 44%](#), but show high variance, just 20% of C-Suite cite them versus 75% of Revenue leaders. [Identity solutions, despite their growing relevance, remain low at 14%](#), revealing a potential underinvestment in tools critical for future addressability.

Budget decisions reflect where publishers believe growth will come from. Investing in ad platforms and subscriptions makes sense, but true scale will come from connecting these systems. Publishers should ensure dollars flow not just into channels, but into the data, identity, and AI layers that unify them. Efficiency isn't just cutting costs, it's making every tool smarter together.

Tech Stack Tools Requiring Operational Lift:

Ad Platforms, AI and Data Tools Demand Most Resource

Operationally, [ad platforms take up the most resources for 72% of respondents](#), rising to 91% for Product/UX and 86% for Editorial. This highlights the complexity of managing monetization infrastructure, including optimization, vendor coordination, and compliance. Ad Ops (50%) and C-Suite (80%) also report high involvement, reinforcing the cross-functional effort required to keep ad systems running efficiently.

[AI/ML model development and management ranks second at 56% overall](#), with heavy lifts reported by Directors (68%) and Product/UX (64%). This suggests that while AI is a strategic priority, it also demands significant resourcing for implementation, iteration, and oversight.

[CDPs come next at 46%](#), led by C-Suite (60%) and Audience Development (46%). [Other areas like data governance and privacy compliance \(34%\) and integration of disparate systems \(24%\)](#) also reflect the growing complexity of the tech ecosystem.

Publishers are not just spending money, they're spending time managing fragmentation. The future lies in simplification. Investing in unified platforms and automation that connect ads, AI, and data systems can dramatically reduce operational drag. Freeing teams from maintenance means shifting energy toward strategy, experimentation, and audience growth, the true drivers of competitive advantage.


Customer Data Fragmentation:

Publishers Are Struggling to Unify Customer Data

Data fragmentation remains a major challenge for publishers. A combined 84% report difficulty unifying data across systems, with 40% saying it's a significant challenge they're not yet addressing, and another 44% stating it's a known issue they are starting to work on. This pain point is highest among Ad Ops (75%) and Editorial (71%), whose teams rely on real-time insights to drive decisions but lack unified infrastructure.

Only 10% say they have solid decisioning and delivery engines in place, and just 6% report no concern at all. Interestingly, Revenue teams (75%) are more likely to be actively addressing fragmentation, while C-Suite (40%) and Product/UX (0%) show fewer signs of advanced integration.

Fragmented data limits personalization, reduces monetization efficiency, and increases operational drag. Publishers should prioritize interoperability, connecting CDPs, ESPs, and identity systems into a cohesive framework. Success requires both tech and team alignment. The goal isn't just better data, it's smarter action. Unified data should power real-time segmentation, targeted experiences, and revenue at every touchpoint.



84%

of publishers state unifying customer data across their tech stack is a significant challenge and is blocking growth.

Cross-Team Collaboration:

Signs of Progress, but Full Integration Remains Elusive

More than half of respondents (56%) say they're starting to see more open conversations and shared goals across departments like editorial, ad ops, product, and subscriptions. This shift is strongest among VPs (75%) and Revenue teams (75%), signaling that collaboration is often driven from the top down. Editorial (59%) and Audience Development (62%) also report growing alignment, key for unifying audience and revenue strategies.

Only 20% of respondents say their organizations are truly seeing business outcomes from cross-team collaboration. This suggests that while silos may be softening, most publishers are still in the early phases of integrated workflows. Meanwhile, 24% say they're not collaborating effectively and are starting to feel the effects of conflicting goals, especially Ad Ops (75%) and Editorial (43%).

Collaboration can't be left to chance. Publishers should formalize cross-functional alignment through shared KPIs, integrated planning cycles, and joint ownership of audience and revenue outcomes. The future belongs to organizations that operate as one newsroom, data-informed, goal-aligned, and user-first.

24%

Almost a quarter (24%) of publishers say a lack of collaboration across teams is impacting the business.

Budgetary and Resource Constraints:

Teams Feel the Squeeze, but Responses Vary Widely

Resource pressure is real, though not universally felt. A third (34%) of respondents say resource scarcity has become a significant challenge, especially among Managers (50%), Ad Ops (75%), and Editorial (71%)—roles directly responsible for execution and delivery. These teams are often asked to deliver more with less, balancing content, monetization, and operational responsibilities.

Another 10% say resource pressure is business as usual, a common sentiment in leaner organizations. However, 46% report having a well-resourced in-house team, led by Directors (58%), Audience Development (62%), and Revenue (75%). These better-resourced groups may reflect strategic investments or structural advantages in tech, staffing, or monetization. Interestingly, 10% say they're becoming more efficient through automation—a small but promising signal that some publishers are adapting through smarter tooling and workflows.

Efficiency isn't just about doing more with less, it's about doing the right things faster. Publishers should audit workflows, invest in automation where it adds value, and reallocate resources toward high-impact areas like user engagement, data activation, and subscription growth.

34%

Over a third (34%) of publishers say budgetary and resource constraints have become a significant challenge.


Adapting to Market Conditions:

Agility a Missed Advantage

A strong majority of publishers (64%) say their goals are fixed, regardless of market conditions, seasonality, or economic shifts. This is especially prevalent among Editorial (86%), Managers (56%), and Revenue roles (50%), suggesting a consistent focus on long-term benchmarks or legacy planning cycles.

Meanwhile, 26% say they make minor adjustments as needed, particularly among Directors (28%) and Ad Ops (25%). Only 10% report having a flexible strategy that adapts to real-time market dynamics. C-Suite (20%) and Product/UX (25%) show slightly more agility, hinting that responsiveness is more often found in leadership and innovation roles than in day-to-day operations.

This lack of adaptability could leave publishers exposed during economic downturns, platform changes, or shifts in consumer behavior, especially in an environment where audience loyalty and ad budgets are volatile. In a climate defined by change, rigidity is a risk. Publishers should revisit planning processes, building in checkpoints for rapid adjustments based on performance data, audience trends, and market shifts. Agility isn't reactive, it's strategic resilience.



10%

Only 10% of publishers have a flexible strategy that adapts to market dynamics.

AI and Automation Investments:

Momentum Is Building, but Adoption is Uneven

Publishers are beginning to embrace AI and automation, but adoption varies by role and maturity. **Almost half (46%) report they have ongoing initiatives to integrate AI into operations**, particularly among Directors (68%), Audience Development (54%), and Product/UX (55%). This reflects growing recognition that automation can reduce manual effort and increase scalability, especially in content creation, user segmentation, and campaign execution.

Another **28% are exploring options and running small tests**, signaling that many are still in experimentation mode. Managers (39%) and Editorial (23%) fall into this camp, likely evaluating fit and ROI before deeper investment. However, **22% say they are not investing in AI at all**, a figure that spikes among Ad Ops (75%) and Editorial (43%), roles that may see AI as less relevant to their responsibilities.

AI shouldn't be treated as an add-on, it's a long-term accelerator. Publishers should identify repetitive, high-effort workflows where automation can drive immediate value, then scale into more complex applications like personalization, testing, and prediction. The real win lies in freeing teams to focus on what only humans can do best.

22%

A staggering 22% of publishers are making no investments in AI or automation to improve operational efficiency.

Increasing Ad Revenue:

Ad Density Wins, but Targeting and UX Are Key

To drive ad revenue in 2025, most publishers are still turning to volume. 80% of respondents say they plan to increase ad density or quantity, with full adoption among Revenue (100%) and Ad Ops (75%) teams. Managers are especially aggressive here, with 89% favoring this strategy, indicating that teams responsible for implementation are still leaning on tried-and-true methods to hit revenue targets.

Increasing traffic/pageviews is the second-most common approach (66%), with strong support from the C-Suite (80%) and Audience Development (77%). Meanwhile, diversifying ad formats is gaining momentum at 58%, particularly among Product/UX (57%) and Directors (63%), pointing to a growing interest in native, video, and audio solutions that can balance UX and monetization. Ad personalization and targeting is cited by 54%, led by VPs (75%) and Product/UX (71%). However, first-party data activation, a critical enabler for personalization, trails at just 28% overall, despite looming addressability challenges.

Publishers can't afford to chase short-term gains at the expense of long-term trust. While increased density may boost revenue, the future belongs to those investing in relevance over volume. Identity-driven personalization, privacy-safe targeting, and high-performing formats (e.g., post-content, contextual, native) deliver sustained impact without sacrificing user experience.


Ad Density Impact on UX:

Publishers Are Concerned, Even as They Scale Volume

As publishers increase ad density to boost revenue, concerns about user UX are widespread. 72% say it's at least a mild concern, with Managers (89%), Ad Ops (100%), and Editorial (77%) reporting the highest levels of worry. This signals awareness that more ads can risk alienating audiences, especially when quantity isn't matched with quality or context.

Only 28% of respondents say they're comfortable with their current approach to ad density. Notably, just 11% of Managers and 0% of Ad Ops share this confidence, suggesting that those closest to ad implementation are most sensitive to its UX trade-offs. Even among Revenue roles, where 100% plan to increase ad quantity, 75% still express UX concerns, highlighting a clear tension between revenue goals and reader experience.

More ads don't have to mean worse UX, but only if delivery is thoughtful. Publishers should adopt moment-based and post-content ad strategies that respect user attention while maintaining high CPMs. By using behavioral cues and real-time identity data, it's possible to serve fewer, better-timed ads that monetize without disruption.



72%

of publishers say increasing
ad density is a concern for
damaging UX.

Driving Revenue and Minimizing Ad Blockers:

Most Say It's a Challenge, but Few Have a Clear Strategy

Balancing ad revenue with a seamless user experience remains a pain point. 60% of respondents say it's somewhat challenging to maintain revenue while minimizing ad blocker use and preserving reader satisfaction. This challenge is especially acute for Managers (83%), Editorial (68%), and Product/UX teams (71%), the roles most responsible for execution and user interaction.

Only a third (34%) say they're comfortable with the balance they provide, with the C-Suite (60%) and Revenue roles (75%) showing more confidence, reflecting a gap between strategic perception and operational reality. Just 6% say they have strategies in place to mitigate ad blocker impact, showing that few publishers have a proactive solution for one of digital media's most persistent issues.

Maintaining UX while growing ad revenue requires more than moderation, it demands smart monetization. Publishers should focus on ad formats that respect consumption patterns (e.g., post-content units) and layer in behavior-based targeting to avoid intrusiveness. Readers respond best when monetization feels invisible but intentional—designed around them, not just the page.

6%

**Merely 6% of publishers
have strategies in place to
mitigate ad blocker impact.**

Header Bidding and Programmatic:

Widely Adopted, but Reliance Varies Across Teams

Programmatic monetization, via header bidding and related strategies is a central part of most publishers' ad revenue approach. 70% say it's moderately important, with strong alignment among Directors (74%), Managers (72%), and Editorial (82%). This indicates broad adoption of programmatic, but also suggests that for many, it remains one of several tools rather than the dominant revenue driver.

Only 22% say programmatic is very important, rising among VPs (38%) and Revenue teams (25%). Just 8% describe it as critically important, with this strongest among C-Suite (20%), perhaps reflecting strategic commitments to automated, scalable ad revenue. Notably, Product/UX shows mixed signals, with 43% rating it very important and 43% also ranking it only moderately so.

Programmatic is no longer optional, but its real value comes from optimization, not just implementation. Publishers should move beyond basic adoption and prioritize header bidding strategies that are identity-aware and UX-friendly. Real-time data signals, format diversification, and supply path efficiency will separate programmatic leaders from laggards.



8%

Just 8% of publishers describe programmatic as critically important and their primary monetization method.

Identifying Audiences Effectively:

Most Struggle with Anonymous Users, Despite Need

Audience identification remains a major hurdle. Only 14% of publishers say they have robust strategies in place, such as first-party data frameworks or identity graphs, to identify a high percentage of their readers. While this rises slightly among C-Suite (20%) and Revenue (14%), it remains worryingly low across all roles.

The majority of publishers are still operating in the dark: 40% say readers remain mostly anonymous and that it's a growing concern, with this sentiment strongest among C-Suite (60%) and Editorial (43%). Another 32% say they're aware of the issue but not concerned, a stance common among Product/UX (29%) and Ad Ops (50%), potentially signaling a disconnect between strategic risks and technical execution. A smaller group (14%) are starting to address identification challenges using identity solutions.

As third-party cookies disappear, persistent audience identification is no longer a nice-to-have, it's essential. Publishers should invest in deterministic identity solutions that work across sessions and devices, enabling personalized engagement, retargeting, and monetization without reliance on cookies. Building a scalable first-party identity layer today ensures competitive advantage tomorrow, especially in a privacy-centric world where addressability defines revenue.

Targeting Readers with the Right Call-to-Action

Most Readers Remain Anonymous

Audience targeting is still a major obstacle for publishers. 56% of respondents say their readers remain mostly anonymous, making personalized CTAs difficult to deliver. This issue is particularly acute for Managers (67%), Editorial (64%), and Product/UX teams (71%), groups closest to the audience experience.

Only 12% say they have strong segmentation and targeting capabilities based on user behavior, with slightly higher confidence among Revenue (14%) and C-Suite (20%). Another 16% say they struggle to activate their data even when they have it, and an additional 16% are starting to adopt personalization tools, a sign of early but limited progress.

Effective targeting hinges on more than just data collection, it requires real-time segmentation and delivery systems that match user intent with value. Publishers should focus on building an identity foundation and layering in behavioral triggers to guide CTAs like newsletter sign-ups or subscription offers. Personalization isn't just about conversion, it's how you prove relevance in every interaction.

56%

Well over half of publishers say their readers remain anonymous, making targeting difficult.

Driving Readers Down the Funnel:

Conversions Remain Difficult for Many Publishers

Turning readers into subscribers or buyers continues to be a major challenge. [Almost half \(46%\) of publishers say they are not effectively driving users toward valuable actions](#), and that this is a gap they know they need to fix. This concern is especially high among Managers (61%) and Product/UX teams (71%), all of whom are closest to the touchpoints where user action (or inaction) happens.

Only [42% say they are successfully converting users with measurable ROI](#). This view is most common among Directors (58%) and Audience Development (54%), pointing to pockets of maturity where segmentation, identity, and messaging are working together. [An additional 4% say they are continuously optimizing](#), but this group is very small, indicating limited sophistication across the industry. Just [8% of respondents say conversion isn't a concern](#), mostly among the C-Suite (20%) and Ad Ops (25%), suggesting a possible disconnect between strategic oversight and operational reality.

Conversion is where strategy becomes revenue. Publishers must unify data, identity, and intent to create seamless user journeys, from content discovery to email capture to paid subscription. Investing in behavioral targeting and triggered messaging will help close the gap between engagement and monetization. In an attention economy, moving users down the funnel isn't optional, it's the model.


Identifying Website Traffic:

The Vast Majority Remain Anonymous

Most publishers still struggle to identify their users at scale. Half (50%) say they can identify only 10–25% of their audience, a figure consistent across nearly all job roles. Another 34% report even lower recognition rates, under 10%, with this issue most common among Managers (44%), Product/UX (57%), and Editorial (36%). These numbers reflect a major gap between data collection and actionable identity.

Only 12% say they identify between 26–50% of users, and a mere 4% report visibility into more than half of their audience. Revenue (75%) and C-Suite (40%) respondents are slightly more confident in their identity infrastructure, but even among these groups, most still fall below 25% user recognition.

Low identity coverage is a critical weakness in an era where addressability drives revenue. Publishers should prioritize first-party identity strategies, combining login prompts, email capture, and device-level signals, to move beyond session-based anonymity. Knowing your users is no longer a luxury; it's the foundation for subscriptions, personalization, and high-yield ad targeting.



84%

of publishers are able to
identify fewer than a
quarter of unique visitors.

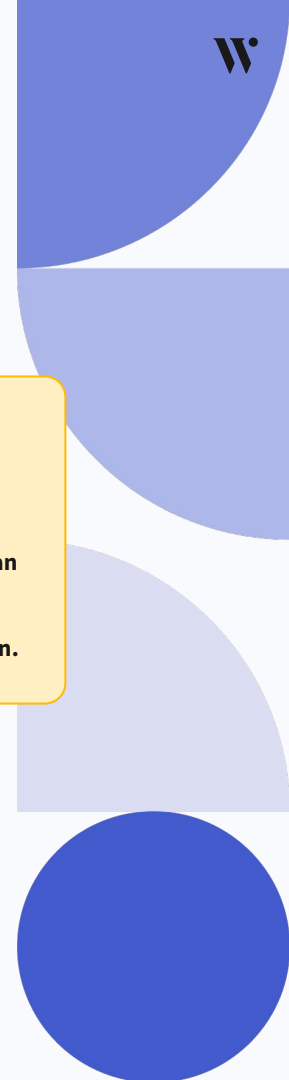
The Role of Email in Audience Monetization:

Most Rely on Email, but Few Maximize Its Potential

Email is widely seen as an essential tool, but the level of strategic use varies. 84% of publishers say email is an important channel, though many admit they could be doing more with it. This sentiment is consistent across all job levels, especially among Managers (89%), Editorial (86%), and Product/UX (71%). Email's importance is most fully realized among Revenue (100%) and C-Suite (80%) respondents, pointing to leadership support for the channel.

However, only 8% say email is a critical component of their strategy. This gap suggests that while nearly all use email, few are activating its full value as a lifecycle tool, spanning acquisition, engagement, conversion, and retention. Another 8% consider email a minor channel, most notably in Ad Ops (50%), where its direct impact may be less visible.

Email is the highest-intent, lowest-cost channel publishers own, but it must be treated as more than a newsletter. Leveraging identity, segmentation, and triggered messaging can transform email into a full-funnel revenue driver.



92%

of publishers say email is an important or critical channel for audience retention and monetization.

Primary Goals of Newsletter Strategy:

Ad Revenue, Traffic and Subscriptions

Publishers are leaning into newsletters with monetization top of mind. [Increasing ad revenue is the leading goal \(70%\)](#), particularly among Revenue (100%), Editorial (68%), and Managers (67%). This reflects email's growing role as a direct monetization channel, often powered by high-CPM placements and sponsored content. Close behind, [driving subscriptions or paid memberships is cited by 60% overall](#)—with 100% of both Revenue and C-Suite respondents emphasizing its importance.

[Increasing website traffic follows at 62%](#), especially among Editorial (86%) and C-Suite (40%), showing email's continued role in content distribution. However, [only 46% of publishers say they prioritize deeper audience loyalty and engagement](#), despite newsletters being a key touchpoint for habit-building. This is even lower among Managers (33%) and Product/UX (14%). Meanwhile, only [26% cite first-party data collection as a goal](#), and just [30% use email to promote content or products](#), suggesting huge untapped potential for leveraging newsletters beyond clicks and revenue.

Newsletters are more than monetization channels, they're relationship engines. Publishers should focus on building loyalty through personalized, segmented, high-frequency newsletters that deepen user connection. Stronger engagement today builds higher LTV tomorrow.

Pressure to Increase Readership:

Feeling the Heat, with Fewer Resources

The majority of publishers report pressure to grow readership and content engagement, but the resourcing to support this varies. **Almost half (48%) say they are under pressure and have even fewer resources to meet those expectations.** This strain is most acutely felt among Ad Ops (75%), Revenue (75%), and Managers (56%), roles directly tasked with execution.

Another **24% describe it as business as usual, with consistent expectations year over year.** Meanwhile, **just 26% feel well-positioned, saying they are under pressure but have the strategic investments in place to deliver.** This optimistic group is more represented among Directors (37%) and Audience Development (38%), suggesting stronger alignment between goals and tools in those roles. Only **2% of respondents say this is not part of their remit,** indicating that content engagement is a shared mandate across nearly every department.

When engagement goals rise but resourcing doesn't, prioritization becomes critical. Publishers should double down on channels and tactics with the highest ROI, like personalized newsletters, identity-driven engagement, and evergreen content that builds ongoing value.



48%

Almost half of publishers say they are under pressure to increase readership and engagement with less resources.

Delivering Relevant Content Across Platforms:

Personalization Lags—Most Say They're Not There Yet

Delivering personalized content across platforms remains a work in progress for most publishers. Over half (56%) say they aren't surfacing relevant content as well as they'd like to and know it needs to be addressed. This is especially common among Managers (72%), Product/UX (86%), and Editorial (55%), teams closest to user interaction. The data reveals a strong awareness of the problem, but limited progress in solving it.

Only 22% of publishers say they are successfully personalizing content with strong results and user feedback. This small, high-performing group includes Directors (26%) and Audience Development (46%), who are more likely to be using behavioral segmentation and recommendation tools. Another 12% say they're just beginning to implement personalization technologies, while 10% admit they're not doing well in this area and are not yet concerned, mainly C-Suite and Ad Ops, where personalization may not be seen as a core responsibility.

Personalization is no longer optional, it's expected. Publishers should move beyond basic tagging or category feeds and adopt real-time behavioral engines that adapt content recommendations dynamically. Done well, personalization improves engagement, retention, and monetization, while respecting user attention and intent. It's how publishers prove relevance in a crowded, algorithm-driven landscape.

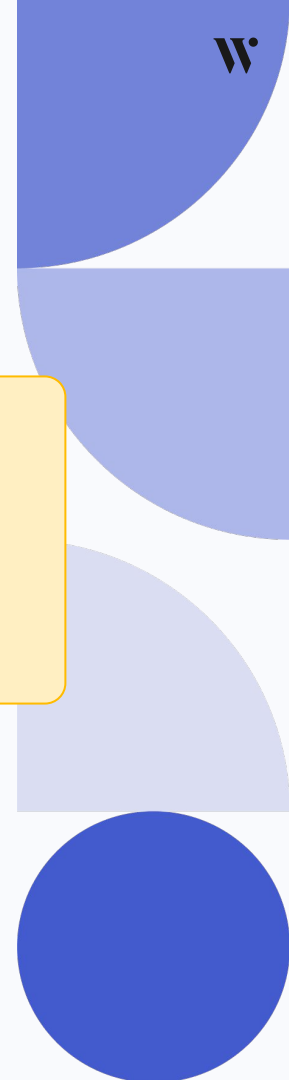
Importance of Newsletters to Retention:

Most See Value, but Strategic Weight Varies

Newsletters are widely viewed as valuable, but not all publishers treat them as a core pillar of their strategy. 48% say newsletters are moderately important for engagement, but not central to their business. This view is especially common among Managers (50%), Product/UX (43%), and Ad Ops (75%).

In contrast, 36% consider newsletters very important, a strong signal that more publishers see them as a key lever for retention and loyalty. This importance is especially high among Editorial (43%) and Audience Development (46%), teams most directly connected to content distribution and audience growth. Just 6% say newsletters are critically important, with strong sentiment only among Audience Development (15%). Another 10% consider newsletters not important, with that view most prevalent among Ad Ops (25%) and the C-Suite (20%).

Newsletters are one of the few direct, owned channels publishers control. Elevating them from a supporting tool to a strategic asset—through personalization, testing, and frequency optimization, can drive meaningful gains in engagement, retention, and lifetime value.



42%

of publishers say newsletters are either “very” or “critically important” to their retention strategy.


Personalized Newsletters:

Segmentation Yes, but Little Personalization

Most publishers acknowledge the value of personalization in newsletters, but few have fully implemented it. Only 18% say they are actively personalizing content and offers based on user behavior, with adoption strongest among Audience Development (31%) and Directors (26%). These teams are more likely to have access to behavioral data and the mandate to drive engagement and conversions.

A third (32%) say they are starting to segment their audiences for different newsletter content, indicating a growing, but still early shift toward more tailored messaging. Meanwhile, 36% still send largely generic newsletters, especially among C-Suite (60%) and Ad Ops (50%), where content personalization may not be a day-to-day focus. Another 14% report they don't have newsletters at all, a sentiment more common among Managers (22%) and Ad Ops (25%).

Generic newsletters miss the mark in a world of personalized feeds and smart inboxes. Publishers should treat newsletter personalization as core infrastructure, linking identity, behavior, and content to deliver relevance at scale. Small changes, like interest-based segmentation or dynamic modules, can yield big engagement gains.



18%

Only 18% of publishers are actively personalizing content and offers within newsletters.

Closing Insight:

To thrive in 2025, publishers must operationalize AI, unify fragmented tech stacks, and prioritize ad quality over quantity—delivering smarter experiences that drive both revenue and retention.

Unifying the Tech Stack for Smarter Execution

While most publishers have strong tools, CDPs, ESPs and ad platforms, few are fully integrated. Fragmentation hinders real-time activation.

The next phase is orchestration: eradicating silos and connecting tools across departments to drive unified decision-making, automated engagement, and measurable outcomes.

Prioritizing Ad Quality Over Quantity

The overwhelming majority of publishers are increasing ad load, yet most express concern about user experience.

The future isn't more ads, it's better ads. Post-content units, moment-based targeting, and identity-powered personalization will allow publishers to scale ad revenue without undermining trust or retention.

AI That Goes Beyond Experimentation

AI experimentation is widespread, used for content optimization, generation, and personalization, but only 18% have adopted it meaningfully.

The opportunity lies in moving from siloed tests to integrated workflows that enhance efficiency, power audience insights, and create scalable, dynamic content experiences that drive engagement.

Closing Insight:

Success hinges on moving beyond cookies, expanding revenue streams and implementing scalable identity that empowers publishers to own their audience, data and monetization with confidence.

Preparing for a Cookieless Future

With very few publishers reporting mature first-party data strategies, the industry remains underprepared for the end of third-party cookies.

Publishers must urgently invest in identity infrastructure and consent-based data collection to maintain addressability, targeting, and advertiser confidence.

Building Resilience By Diversifying Revenue

Subscriptions and branded content dominate current models, but affiliate, eCommerce, and first-party email monetization remain underleveraged.

The publishers best positioned for growth are those embracing multi-channel strategies that balance short-term wins with long-term reader value.

Identity the Foundational Layer of Personalization

Half of publishers can identify less than a quarter of their visitors, and most can identify fewer than 10%.

Without scalable identity solutions, personalization and revenue suffer. Deterministic ID frameworks and behavioral segmentation are essential for moving from anonymous sessions to monetizable users.

Wunderkind

Wunderkind empowers leading media companies to grow their owned audiences and increase revenue. With our Publisher Growth Suite, publishers can transform monetization and engage readers with personalized, one-to-one messages at scale.

Publishers like the New York Post, CBS Sports, and Trusted Media Brands rely on Wunderkind to unlock new revenue streams and build deeper audience relationships. Our advertising product, which is based on behavioral triggers, delivers industry-leading CPMs without interrupting the reader's experience. Our audience development solution drives significant results, including 4x-10x email list growth and a 10% lift in consumer marketing revenue. It's all powered by our proprietary identity graph, which tracks over 9 billion devices and 2 trillion digital events annually to turn anonymous traffic into known customers, all without third-party cookies.

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