

# Maximising ROI in the advertising landscape

**Navigating the complexities  
in advertising for optimal  
campaign performance**



**pwc**



The world of digital advertising is a complex ecosystem that seamlessly connects users, publishers, advertisers and technology platforms. At its core, this intricate system aims to deliver relevant ads to users while maximising value for brands. However, the journey from a user's browsing activity to the display of a targeted ad involves numerous steps and technologies, each playing a crucial role in the process.

When a business that wants to invest in advertising enters this ecosystem, it typically begins by signing a marketing services agreement with an agency or an in-house team and collaborating to develop a campaign strategy. This marks the company's active engagement in the general media landscape, requiring navigation of various aspects such as pricing models, media performance metrics and control frameworks.

Despite the sophistication of modern paid media, our experience reveals that there are often significant gaps between client expectations and campaign delivery. The intricacies of digital performance and ad spend can lead to substantial inefficiencies within the media advertising ecosystem. Our research indicates that between 30% to 90% of digital campaign impressions are not delivered fully as intended, highlighting the challenges businesses face in achieving optimal results.

Some of these challenges include:



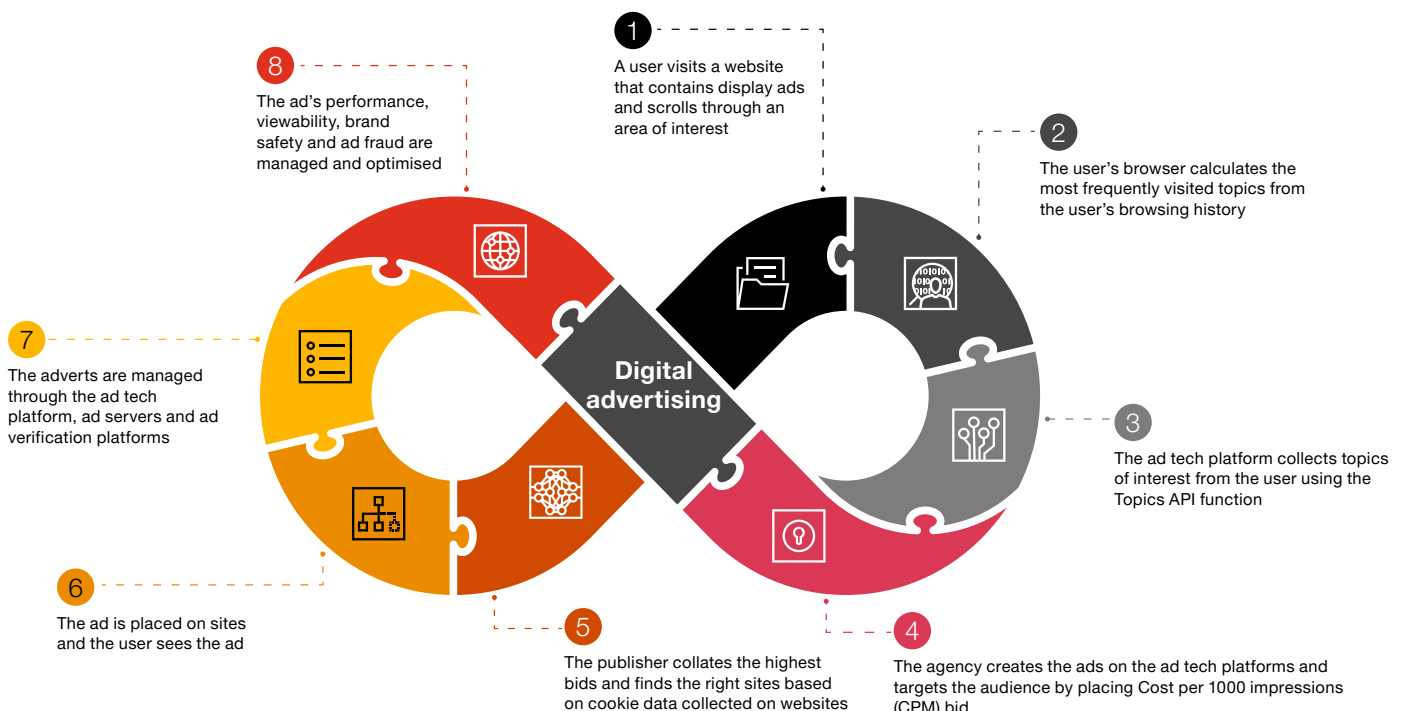
Each of these issues can significantly impact the effectiveness of digital advertising campaigns, potentially leading to wasted resources and missed opportunities for brands. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the digital advertising landscape and the implementation of robust strategies to mitigate risks and optimise performance.



## A comprehensive approach to the digital advertising ecosystem

As we explore the nuances of the digital advertising ecosystem, it becomes clear that understanding the intricate process of ad delivery and management is crucial for effective campaign execution. This complex and dynamic field involves several key steps, each playing a vital role in the ecosystem:

- 1 Interest-based targeting:**  
At the foundation of effective advertising lies the ability to understand user interests. Advanced technologies like the Topics API collect user data and tailor interests without invading privacy, setting the stage for relevant ad delivery.
- 2 Adtech and server management:**  
Building on this user data, sophisticated technological infrastructure manages information and ensures reliable ad delivery, creating a seamless bridge between user interests and advertiser content.
- 3 Real-time bidding:**  
With user profiles and advertiser goals in hand, real-time bidding enables instant ad space auctions. This dynamic process allows for optimal ad display, maximising the value of each impression.
- 4 Agency/in-house strategy and creative development:**  
Armed with insights from the previous steps, agencies/in-house teams design ads and develop targeting strategies. This creative process aims to effectively reach precise audience segments, translating data into compelling content.
- 5 Publisher ad placement:**  
The carefully crafted ads are then integrated seamlessly into content by publishers. This integration enhances user experience while maximising ad effectiveness, creating a win-win situation for all parties involved.
- 6 Performance monitoring and optimisation:**  
The journey doesn't end with ad placement. Continuous tracking of ad interactions and refinement of strategies ensure ongoing improvement in results and ROI, completing the cycle and informing future campaigns.



By understanding these interconnected components and implementing robust review processes, businesses can navigate the complexities of the digital advertising landscape more effectively. This comprehensive approach ensures campaigns deliver intended results and maximise value for both brands and media owners, ultimately leading to a more efficient and effective advertising ecosystem.

Digital advertising presents a complex landscape filled with opportunities and challenges. This examination will explore frequent mistakes businesses encounter and offer effective strategies to optimise their return on investment in this evolving domain. By honing these critical aspects, companies can maintain a competitive edge in the rapidly changing realm of paid media.





## Strategic oversight on traditional and digital campaigns

Building on the digital advertising landscape discussed above, it's crucial for advertisers to implement robust strategies to maximise the effectiveness of their campaigns in both the digital and traditional landscapes. The journey from user interest to ad delivery presents various challenges, but by focusing on key areas of oversight and optimisation, advertisers can enhance their return on investment and ensure their messages effectively reach the intended audience.

To navigate this complex ecosystem successfully, advertisers should adopt a multi-faceted approach that encompasses:

- Financial diligence
- Performance tracking
- Technological vigilance

This begins with a thorough examination of contractual obligations and financial reconciliations. By meticulously reviewing agency billing reports against booking systems, advertisers can uncover discrepancies and potentially recover unbilled media spend. Similarly, a comprehensive assessment of rebates and discounts, including annual volume rebates, can reveal additional value that might otherwise go unclaimed.

Performance monitoring extends beyond simple metrics to ensure that contractually promised key performance indicators are met throughout the campaign lifecycle. This includes specific, measurable targets such as video views or engagement rates, which should be clearly defined and regularly evaluated. In the era of AI-driven optimisation, it's tempting to rely solely on automated tools. However, the value of human oversight cannot be overstated. Regular manual reviews and detailed optimisation logs are essential to ensure that campaigns are adjusted in real time to meet evolving objectives and audience behaviours.

Perhaps most critically, advertisers must prioritise the integrity and visibility of their ad placements. Implementing robust ad verification tools to track viewability, combat ad fraud and ensure brand safety is non-negotiable in today's digital landscape. While the cost of these tools may seem prohibitive, the potential damage to brand reputation and wasted ad spend far outweigh the investment. Advertisers must set clear benchmarks for these metrics and actively work to achieve them, understanding that ads that aren't viewable, are served to bots or appear alongside inappropriate content are not just ineffective—they're potentially harmful to the brand.

By addressing these key areas—financial reconciliation, rebate verification, key performance indicator tracking, human-led optimisation and comprehensive ad verification—advertisers can more effectively navigate the complexities of the digital advertising ecosystem. This holistic approach not only maximises campaign performance but also ensures transparency, protects brand integrity and drives meaningful engagement with target audiences in an increasingly crowded digital landscape.





## Benchmarking excellence: Driving strategic insights and cost efficiency in advertising

Benchmarking serves as a vital tool for cost optimisation and strategic improvement in advertising. It provides a concrete method to assess cost bases and resource allocation. By comparing a company’s advertising practices against industry leaders, benchmarking helps identify areas for improvement and cost reduction.

In the context of digital marketing, benchmarking applies to various aspects such as adtech platform usage, campaign performance metrics and process efficiencies. This approach aligns with challenges like misaligned campaign objectives, suboptimal ad placements and inefficient budget allocation. Benchmarking can reveal how top performers manage viewability rates, combat ad fraud and ensure brand safety—all critical factors in campaign success. In the case of traditional media, typical benchmarks comprise circulation, viewership impressions and reach to ensure the campaigns are optimally placed for the best results.

The process encompasses performance benchmarking (e.g. engagement metrics), process benchmarking (e.g. optimisation practices) and strategic benchmarking (e.g. budget allocation across digital channels). By focusing on these interconnected areas, advertisers can identify performance drivers, differentiate effective processes and align their digital marketing efforts with overall business objectives. This data-driven approach enables more informed decision-making, helping advertisers to optimise costs while maintaining or improving campaign effectiveness in the competitive digital landscape.



How does this analysis support cost optimisation?

Provides a numerical standard against which activities can be compared.

Identifies how internal processes compare to peers and the market from complexity capability perspectives.

Identifies how processes should integrate and which long-term strategies are best-suited to leverage internal capabilities that can transform the business.





## Unveiling digital campaign realities: Key findings from PwC's Digital Performance Review

The PwC Digital Performance Review (DPR) addresses a crucial question in digital advertising:

Is my agency/in-house team bidding for the right audience, in the right context, at the right time?—encompassing the crucial elements of people, process, technology and transparency.

Here are some key findings from our DPR assessments:

- 1 | Inconsistent process application:**  
While agencies and in-house teams often have well-designed processes for digital campaigns, our reviews frequently reveal inconsistencies in their application across different campaigns.
- 2 | Widespread impression errors:**  
A consistent and alarming finding across all clients, including top global advertisers, is that 30%–90% of digital ad impressions contain errors. This high error rate spans across various agencies, in-house teams and regions.
- 3 | Technology utilisation gaps:**  
Many organisations are not fully leveraging their adtech tools, leading to missed opportunities in campaign optimisation and performance tracking.
- 4 | Transparency issues:**  
There are often discrepancies between what's reported in media booking and financial systems versus what's actually delivered in campaigns.
- 5 | Cross-channel inconsistencies:**  
Performance varies significantly across different digital channels, including programmatic, paid social, paid search and others, often due to inconsistent strategies or oversight.
- 6 | Benchmarking revelations:**  
When benchmarked against contract terms, campaign briefs, industry averages and leading practices, many campaigns fall short of expected performance standards.

These typical findings underscore the importance of rigorous, independent assessment of digital advertising efforts.

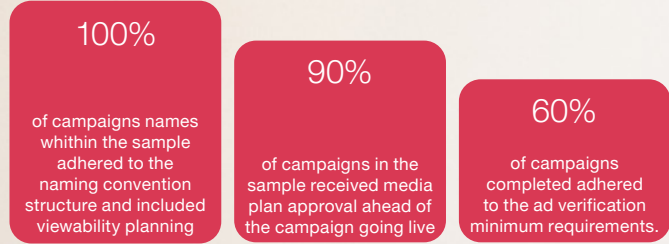
In a recent DPR, as outlined in the anonymised example below, six of the ten campaigns exhibited flight date discrepancies which could have significant impact on campaigns that are time-based such as competitions or campaigns geared towards occasions such as Mother's Day where competitors would have the upper hand. Furthermore, only 30% of the sampled campaigns were fully tracked on DoubleVerify (an ad verification platform), leaving R1.9m worth of media on potentially unsafe and fraudulent inventory. By identifying these issues, advertisers can take targeted actions to improve their digital marketing effectiveness and efficiency, aligning more closely with the best practices we discussed in benchmarking for cost optimisation and strategic improvement.

# Example of a global Digital Process Review executed in a South African market

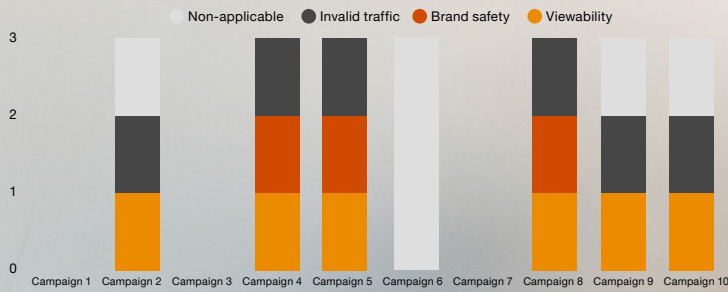
## 1. Six campaigns experienced flight discrepancies between the media plan and the platform (maximum six days)



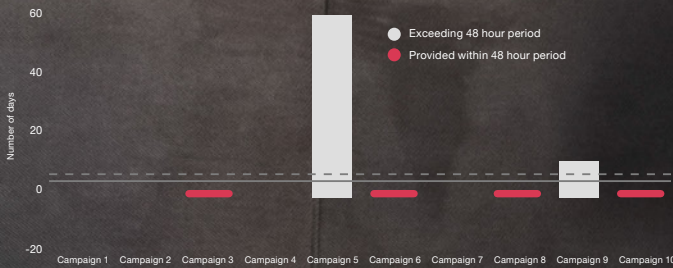
## 2. Naming convention adherence was strong, though one media plan approval was not completed prior to launch and four campaigns did not comply to the global ad verification requirements



## 3. Only three of the ten campaigns had all post-bid monitoring requirements applied in DoubleVerify across invalid traffic, brand safety and viewability



## 4. Launch communication was provided to the client within 48 hours for eight out of ten campaigns; campaign five had comms provided 60 days after launch



PwC's findings commonly reveal significant gaps in campaign execution, from delivery inconsistencies to lack of optimisation. However, these challenges present opportunities for substantial improvements in performance and efficiency:

1. Implement rigorous campaign scheduling and optimisation protocols
2. Refine audience targeting to address over-delivery issues
3. Focus on translating performance improvements into measurable business outcomes
4. Establish continuous benchmarking against industry standards and previous results

By addressing these areas, advertisers can enhance their digital marketing effectiveness, aligning more closely with best practices and maximising return on investment in the complex digital advertising landscape.





## Critical questions for evaluating paid media campaigns

To ensure the success and efficiency of your paid media campaigns, it's essential to reflect on several key aspects. Consider the following questions to evaluate and optimise your strategies:

- **Audience targeting:** Is my agency or in-house team bidding for the right audience, in the right context and at the right time? Consider the people, processes, technology and transparency involved.
- **Value delivery:** Did my campaigns deliver real value? Am I getting the best return on investment?
- **Budget utilisation:** Was the budget for my campaigns fully utilised?
- **Optimisations and improvements:** Were optimisations and improvements made to my campaigns throughout their duration?
- **Audience reach:** Did my intended audience see my ads? Did my ads reach humans or bots?
- **Ad safety:** Were my ads shown on safe inventory throughout the campaign flight duration?





## How we can help:

- **Expertise and professional standards:** Our team combines deep media agency expertise with PwC's professional standards. This includes former media agency professionals and experts in digital, adtech and martech, alongside qualified assurance practitioners who uphold the highest professional standards.
- **Award-winning insights:** We bring unique insights into digital advertising, demonstrated by our PwC UK team's multi-award-winning programmatic study for the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers. Our supply chain transparency study has earned 16 prestigious global awards, showcasing our commitment to excellence. The advertiser-funded ISBA Programmatic Supply Chain Transparency Study, in association with the Association of Online Publishers and carried out by PwC, marks the first time that programmatic advertising supply chains—the way in which advertisers and publishers are served by the programmatic ad delivery system—have been mapped from end to end, anywhere in the world.
- **Proven media review services:** With a strong track record in delivering media review services, we enhance media spending governance. Our insights, backed by years of experience, include best practices from other PwC projects and specific observations tailored to your needs. This includes:
  1. **Financial Contract Review (FCR)**
    - Understanding costs, fees and income
  2. **Media Performance (MP)**
    - Understanding the quality, delivery and price of media
  3. **Digital Process Review (DPR)**
    - Review between delivery and business brief to understand digital ad spend and performance inefficiencies
  4. **Relationship management**
    - Being the best client you can be and getting the best from your agency/in-house team
  5. **Contract management**
    - Ensuring that your contract is up to date and reflects the latest leading practice
  6. **Review/pitch management**
    - Supporting with agency pitches and (if change results) transitional support
  7. **Media and Martech Diagnostic**
    - Comprises eight assessment components collecting all aspects of marketing input and output data from the analysis of objective setting, streamlining processes to ensuring your martech stack is measured to tangible ROI metrics
- **Accurate media benchmarks:** We use comprehensive market data instead of opaque cost pool auditing to ensure accurate media benchmarks. This approach helps avoid costly errors caused by limited data sampling.



## Navigating the complexities of digital advertising for optimal ROI

The digital advertising landscape presents both significant challenges and opportunities for businesses seeking to maximise their ROI. The complexity of the ecosystem demands a strategic, multi-faceted approach that goes beyond simple metric tracking.

Successful advertisers must adopt a holistic view, incorporating financial diligence, performance optimisation and technological vigilance. This includes leveraging benchmarking to drive strategic insights, implementing robust review processes, and addressing key issues such as impression errors, transparency and cross-channel inconsistencies.

By asking critical questions about audience targeting, value delivery and ad safety, businesses can refine their strategies and enhance campaign effectiveness. Ultimately, navigating this intricate landscape requires ongoing evaluation, adaptation and a commitment to best practices. With the right approach and expert guidance, advertisers can turn the complexities of digital advertising into a competitive advantage, ensuring that their messages resonate with the right audience and deliver tangible business outcomes.

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<https://www.pwc.co.za/en/services/marketing-media-review.html>



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