



What's Actually Changing in Paid Media—and What Isn't

What Enrollment Marketers Need to Know in 2026

Here's What You Need to Know

1. **Search Beyond SERPs**
Users rely on SERPs and other channels for answers
2. **Support the Full Funnel**
Paid media must engage in the full journey
3. **AI is Reshaping Delivery & Optimization**
Platforms are increasingly powered by AI
4. **Cost Increases: Prioritize Efficiency & Attribution**
Rising costs demand smarter, more accountable investment
5. **Invest in Measurement**
Strong measurement is critical to understanding and improving performance
6. **Testing as a Core Strategy**
Continuous testing is required, not optional



Poll: Where do you feel you have the least control today?

- Platform algorithms/automation
- Budget constraints
- Lead quality
- Measurement and attribution

Search Beyond SERPs

Users rely on SERPs and other channels for answers

Search Beyond SERPs

Discovery now happens across **TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and AI tools**

Search behavior is more **fragmented** and **non-linear**



Platforms like YouTube function as both **search** + **discovery engines**

Google is evolving (**AI Overviews, fewer clicks**)

Cost Increases: Prioritize Efficiency & Attribution

Rising costs demand smarter, more accountable investment

Cost Increases: Efficiency & Attribution

CPCs and cost per inquiry continue to rise



Budget pressure → focus on quality over volume



Shift from basic lead generation → tracking enrollment outcomes



Greater need for clear attribution across channels



Support the Full Funnel

Paid media must engage in the full journey

Support the Full Funnel

Students are researching earlier and across more touchpoints



Upper Funnel

Video, social, discovery platforms

Mid Funnel

Retargeting, program-specific messaging

Lower Funnel

Search, branded campaigns, conversion optimization

AI is Reshaping Delivery & Optimization

Platforms are increasingly powered by AI

AI is Reshaping Delivery & Optimization

Automation tools (Performance Max, Advantage+) are expanding

Targeting is shifting from manual → algorithmic

AI is optimizing who sees ads, when, and with what creative

Less control, but greater potential scale and efficiency



Invest in Measurement

Strong measurement is critical to understanding and improving performance

Invest in Measurement



Attribution is more complex (cross-platform, privacy changes)

Last-click models are no longer sufficient

Need to connect media → CRM → enrollment outcomes

Better measurement = better optimization + budget decisions

Testing as a Core Strategy

Continuous testing is required, not optional

Testing as a Core Strategy

Platforms reward fresh creative and iteration



Multi-Channel Logic

No single “best” channel

Omni-Testing

Creative, audiences, and landing pages all need testing

Velocity Advantage

Faster testing cycles = faster performance gains

Here's What You Know Now

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Questions?