

Google has a price for you. We found it.

OPINION



Edward Komenda

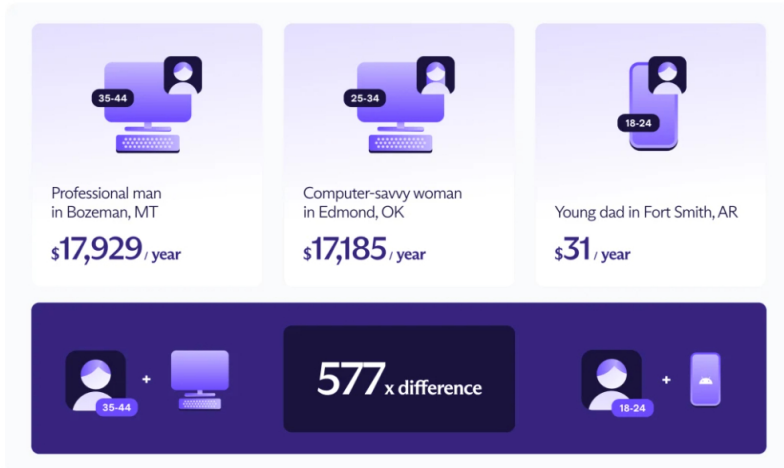
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Proton analyzed over 54,000 demographic profiles using 2025 ad auction data to estimate what advertisers pay to reach different types of Americans. The range is much wider than you might expect.

The average American generates about **\$1,605 a year** in advertising value. A 35- to 44-year-old man in Bozeman, MT, without children, using a desktop and making high-value corporate searches, generates an estimated **\$17,929.30**. An 18- to 24-year-old father in Fort Smith, AR, using an Android phone and making low-value searches, generates **\$31.05**.

That's a **577x difference** between two people using the same free service.



Here's a look at how we assembled our latest report: [The Price of Free Google](#).

How we built this

We constructed a matrix of over **54,000 profiles** varying four variables: **age, gender, location, and device type**. To each profile, we assigned what we call "**search archetypes**" — realistic search behavior based on life stage. A 30-something without children is statistically more likely to search for investment accounts and B2B software. A 60-something is more likely to query Medicare supplements and retirement planning. We modeled these behavioral patterns across each demographic group rather than applying a flat search assumption.

We then applied real advertising auction benchmarks to each archetype. The cost-per-click figures reflect live market rates drawn from aggregated, anonymized pricing data across active campaigns — what advertisers actually pay to reach these demographics in Google's auction system.

One caveat: this analysis estimates advertiser demand for access to a given profile. It does not reflect the exact revenue Google receives from any individual user. What the model reveals is the ceiling, the maximum price the market places on your attention.

The key numbers

- **\$1,605:** average annual ad value of a U.S. user
- **\$760:** median annual ad value
- **\$17,929.30:** maximum estimated annual value (35-44-year-old man, Bozeman, MT, desktop, high-value corporate searches)

What comes with Proton Free?

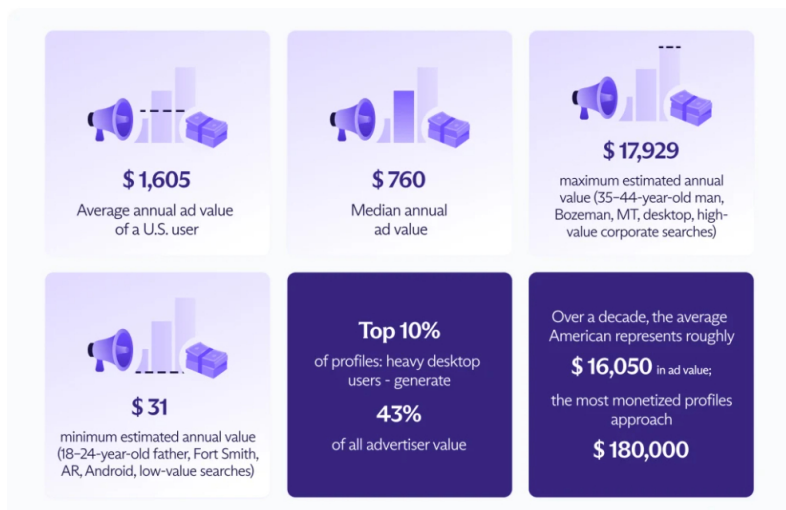
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- **\$31.05:** minimum estimated annual value (18–24-year-old father, Fort Smith, AR, Android, low-value searches)
- The top **10%** of profiles: heavy desktop users — generate **43%** of all advertiser value
- Over a decade, the average American represents roughly **\$16,050** in ad value; the most monetized profiles approach **\$180,000**



The gap between mean (\$1,605) and median (\$760) shows how a small number of high-value profiles pull the average up. The business model runs on premium outliers.

What exactly determines your value to Google?

Children

Non-parents are worth approximately 17% more on average, with the gap widening during peak earning years. Once a profile is flagged as a parent, it gets shifted from \$6-per-click wealth management ads to \$2-per-click ads for minivans and preschools. The highest-value profiles in the dataset are not defined by a single trait, but by a combination of signals pointing to spending power and commercial intent — and none of them are parents.

Device

A desktop user is worth 4.9x more than the same person on Android. An iPhone user is worth 2.7x more than on Android. Advertisers treat device type as a proxy for income and purchase intent. Desktop signals professional context and transaction readiness. iPhone signals premium consumer spending. Android signals lower expected conversion. The same person carries a different price depending solely on what they're searching on.

Age

Advertiser value peaks between 35 and 44. By 65, average value drops to \$511. Older Americans don't disappear from the ecosystem — they're reassigned to a narrower set of high-spend categories: Medicare supplemental insurance, pharmaceuticals, and financial products targeting dependency. Lower general value, more aggressive targeting from a smaller slice of advertisers.

The geography of value

Ad value is partly set by zip code. Google's auction is driven by local service providers — lawyers, real estate agents, financial planners — bidding against each other for local clicks. The more competitive the local market, the higher the floor price for everyone in it.

The two highest-value individual profiles in the dataset both come from the top of the market list: Bozeman, MT and Edmond, OK. In Bozeman, the influx of remote tech workers and outdoor recreation spending has made it one of the most fiercely contested local ad markets in the country, despite its size. Edmond's density of high-CPC professional services makes it the top-ranked market overall.

At the bottom, cities across the Rust Belt and Appalachia reflect the inverse: lower median incomes and fewer competing local advertisers mean less bidding pressure, and lower prices for local attention.

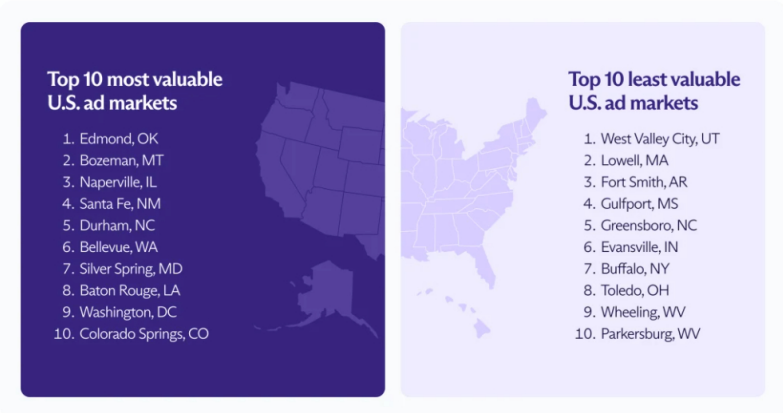
Top 10 most valuable U.S. ad markets

1. Edmond, OK
2. Bozeman, MT
3. Naperville, IL
4. Santa Fe, NM
5. Durham, NC
6. Bellevue, WA
7. Silver Spring, MD
8. Baton Rouge, LA
9. Washington, DC
10. Colorado Springs, CO

Top 10 least valuable U.S. ad markets

1. West Valley City, UT

1. West Valley City, UT
2. Lowell, MA
3. Fort Smith, AR
4. Gulfport, MS
5. Greensboro, NC
6. Evansville, IN
7. Buffalo, NY
8. Toledo, OH
9. Wheeling, WV
10. Parkersburg, WV



Why lock-in has a price

Over 10 years, the average American represents roughly **\$16,050** in ad value. The most monetized profiles approach **\$180,000**. With 1.8 billion active Gmail users, the long-term value of keeping users in the ecosystem is enormous, and it scales with every additional year of behavioral data.

Every cross-product integration, every friction point on data export, every feature built to increase daily engagement is backed by this math.

Google's advertising mechanics have always been deliberately opaque. The data shows why: users are considered money-generating assets, assigned a value and targeted accordingly. Every feature built to increase engagement, every product designed to deepen lock-in, serves that extraction.

Most people would not knowingly hand a corporation hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime to process their email. But that is what the system is built to collect.

Children and the ad ecosystem

The ad ecosystem begins categorizing users when behavioral signals appear. For children growing up online, that process starts early — first school searches, first health queries, first location data feed the profiling system before most kids understand how it works.

Proton Mail's [Born Private](#) lets parents opt a child into an end-to-end encrypted environment from the start, keeping their data out of the auction entirely.

No data, no auction

The alternative is clear: use services that have no financial incentive to monitor you.

Proton Mail and Proton Drive encrypt data before it reaches the server. We cannot scan emails, build a profile, or sell access to your attention. Funded by subscriptions rather than behavioral tracking, Proton has no use for the data that makes you worth \$17,000 a year to an advertiser.

Take away the data, and the auction collapses.

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Edward Komenda

Ed is a writer and journalist. Over the past decade, his work has appeared in major newspapers and magazines across the U.S. and around the world. He has written about everything from business and technology to politics, government, and culture. Ed joined Proton in 2023 to help preserve online privacy as a basic human right.

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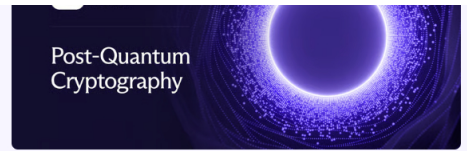
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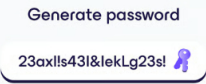
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