

The premium payoff

A first-of-its-kind study defines what makes media “premium” and examines its impact on brand trust, audience engagement, and business outcomes.



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Executive summary

Marketers have more choice than ever when it comes to placing ads, from social media and online video to podcasts and streaming TV. But they've long sensed that across the digital landscape, where active websites alone top 200 million, not all inventory is created equal. Indeed, where your ads appear is quietly becoming your biggest competitive advantage. With budgets under scrutiny and every impression expected to deliver, the smartest investments build equity while driving performance.

Yet many marketers are responding to financial pressure by focusing on cheap reach. According to IAB data, just 22% of advertisers plan to increase brand ad spend in 2025, while more than half (54%) will chase short-term performance. The risk lies in sacrificing long-term brand value for immediate returns. For marketers willing to lean into quality environments, there is a clear opening to stand out, earn trust, and create lasting connections that cheaper reach can't match.

Consider how consumers make purchase decisions: They rarely choose a restaurant, hotel, or pair of shoes based on price alone. They weigh quality, credibility, and customer experience. The data suggests media should be no different, particularly when premium environments are 50% more effective at building positive brand associations among consumers than less premium media placements.

But what is premium media really, and why should marketers make the distinction? This report¹ — based on findings from a multipronged study, including a survey of 4,500 people across the U.S., the U.K., and France — investigates the qualities that make media premium and why those qualities matter for brands and audiences. Surfaced by researchers at PA Consulting and The Trade Desk Intelligence, these insights offer advertisers the clarity to craft strategies that deliver stronger results in the moment while building long-term brand prestige.



What is premium media?

Premium media destinations possess two key qualities: brand affinity and high-quality content environments. They blend credibility, relevance, and consistency with thoughtful ad experiences. The combination earns audience attention, fosters trust, and elevates brand impact.

Key takeaways

1

Where you advertise matters.

A premium media strategy builds brand value in ways cheap reach can't. Premium media earns engagement through credible brand affinity and cohesive environments that feel relevant, providing value for advertisers, publishers, and audiences.

2

Premium media significantly increases purchase intent.

Premium media drives a 40% increase in purchase intent, which is 30% more effective compared to less premium media.

3

Brand credibility rises with consumers.

85% of survey respondents say premium environments increase their trust of advertisers.

4

CTV signals success.

Consumers see advertisers in premium CTV environments as 3.2 times more innovative and 2.6 times more successful than those in less premium locations.

5

Ad experiences loom large for audiences.

Ad environments disproportionately affect perceptions of premium. In fact, 57% of survey respondents say ad-related factors are the biggest drivers in determining what makes an ad environment premium.

The measurable halo effect for brands



Everyone talks about “premium,” but few define it with precision. With this study, we set out to uncover what audiences truly value as premium media and answer a key question: Does it drive measurable results?

As part of our methodology, we applied signaling theory, which suggests advertisers can send powerful signals about brand quality, social status, and attractiveness by choosing the right media context. Premium ad placements, which are often seen as more exclusive, create a halo effect that transfers these signals to the brands that appear in them.

With this theory in mind, we designed a matched-cell experiment across CTV, audio, and digital media. Participants were exposed to ads placed on properties that ranked high on premium markers and those that ranked lower.

The results are hard to ignore. Premium media consistently outperformed less premium placements across the board.

Brand perceptions improve. Ads in premium environments deliver a 30% lift in positive associations such as trust, quality, innovation, and respect, and are 50% more effective at building these perceptions than less premium media.

50% more effective at building these perceptions than less premium media

Purchase intent increases. Exposure to premium placements lifts purchase intent by 40%. These ads were 30% more effective in driving action than ads in lower-quality contexts.

40% lift in purchase intent via exposure to premium placements

Quality signals prove stronger overall.

Premium media enhanced signals like innovation and success, social signals like popularity and respect, and behavioral signals tied to aspiration and attractiveness.

The findings indicate that where you advertise is just as important as what you say or who you target. Reach will always matter, but finding the most valuable reach is what ultimately drives outcomes.

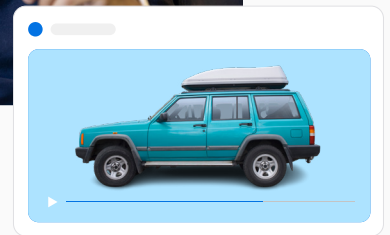
Defining premium media

This study combines in-depth qualitative and quantitative research to uncover what premium truly means to consumers. Survey respondents and academic experts evaluated more than 60 media properties across multiple channels on factors like brand trust and ad relevancy. This allowed us to identify the key markers of premium media and analyze how they influence consumer perceptions of brands advertised within these properties. For instance, 85% of respondents said premium media environments increased their trust of advertisers.

Audiences recognize premium media as possessing two essential qualities: a strong media brand and a quality media environment. Together, they create the foundation for trust, attention, and impact.

The media brand sets the tone. The brand includes everything an audience thinks about a media property before engaging with the content, site, or app. It's the reputation that precedes the experience: the credibility earned through consistent quality, resonance, and audience respect.

The environment determines the experience. This encompasses everything users encounter once they're on a media property. When done

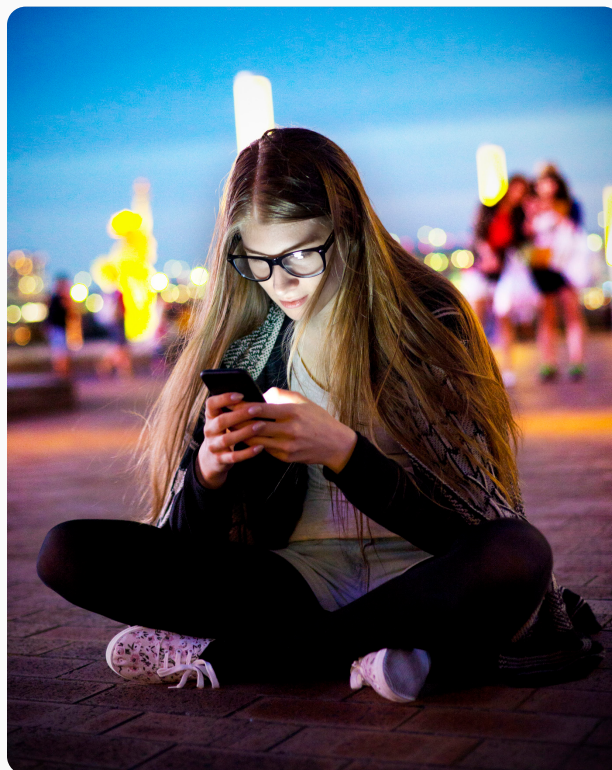


well, the environment reduces friction, increases engagement, and offers a seamless experience in which content and ads feel cohesive, not disruptive. A successful environment enhances the way audiences perceive the media property and the ads within it.

As our data shows, consumers put nearly equal importance on the brand (65%) and environment (70%) when choosing a channel, platform, or website. Only together can they create a media moment worthy of your brand and your audience's time.

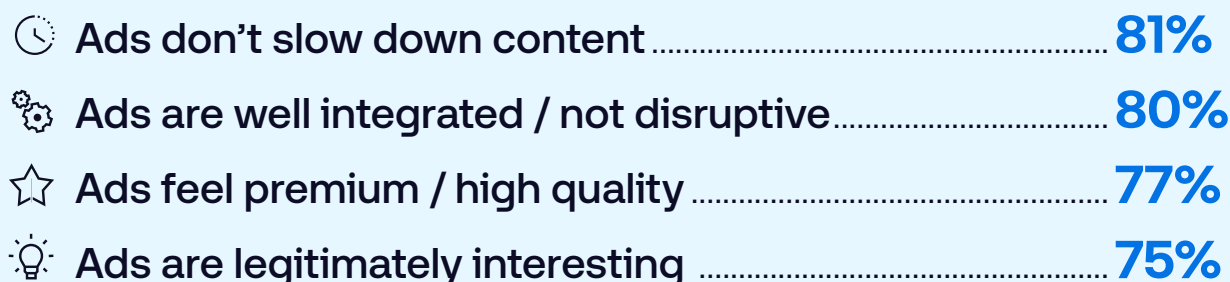
Premium media brands

- 1. Build affinity by maintaining credibility and reliability.** They deliver consistent quality that consumers expect and establish a commitment to transparency, accuracy, and authenticity.
- 2. Demonstrate relevance.** They understand the interests and concerns of their target audience by prioritizing relevant content and ads.
- 3. Convey belonging through personalized experiences.** These brands prioritize thoughtfully curated content that balances personalization and discovery. They make users feel like they're part of a community that shares similar values, interests, or aspirations.



What matters to consumers when determining what is premium

% AGREE THAT IT'S AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN HIGH-QUALITY MEDIA EXPERIENCE



Source: The Value of Premium, PA Consulting and The Trade Desk Intelligence, U.S., U.K., France, June 2025.

Premium media environment

1. Deliver smooth ad-content integration and a user experience that's easy to navigate.

Technical execution forms the foundation of premium environments. This includes intuitive navigation and advertising that doesn't clutter the content experience.

2. Foster deep engagement rather than passive consumption. Engagement goes beyond time on page or click-through rates. It encompasses the quality of interaction, where users actively consume content, share it, and return for more. The quality of ads matters here, too, with 75% of people surveyed agreeing that interesting ads are an important factor of a high-quality media experience.

75% of people surveyed agree that interesting ads are an important factor of a media experience

3. Optimize for a cohesive, frictionless experience between content and ads. The best premium environments eliminate the jarring transitions between editorial content and advertising. Instead, they create integrated

experiences where ads feel contextually relevant and valuable rather than interruptive.

These nuances all work to determine the degree of premium media and reveal a surprising insight: More than half of respondents (57%) agree ad-related factors are the biggest drivers of quality when it comes to creating premium media environments.

57% of respondents agree ad-related factors are the biggest drivers of media quality overall



Where premium wins by channel

Our research reveals detailed performance data across channels. Each one carries its own strengths, which marketers can use to align placements with campaign goals.



CTV, for instance, **excels at building perceptions of advertisers as innovative (3.2 times more effective)**

and successful (2.6 times) than less premium CTV media. Its seamless interface, gated content, and well-integrated ad experience means it stands out as a powerful medium for brand-building. For instance, streamer Disney+ scored well in our study, with respondents saying its intuitive navigation and seamless ad integration creates an environment that feels worthy of their time. By contrast, some video players scored lower due to factors like frequent ad breaks that interrupted the flow of content, according to the findings.



Audio earns audience trust by offering personalized recommendations and authentic, familiar voices. These

factors create a halo effect for advertisers, **driving perceptions of a brand's popularity 2.7 times more effectively than less premium audio, and boosting perceptions of brand trust 2.4 times**



Digital drives **conversions, turning audiences into customers.** Websites stand out when they integrate

eye-catching ads into trusted content while maintaining their signature look and feel — often driving people to click through and purchase. Reputable news sites like *The Economist*, for instance, earned high marks for consistent quality and uncluttered ad experiences, the data showed. In turn, premium digital lifts perceptions of brand credibility (4 times more effectively than less premium digital), popularity (2.3 times), and authenticity (2.1 times).



Social media platforms **capture sizable audiences, but respondents said “cluttered feeds” and lack of guardrails diminish premium perceptions.**

However, Snapchat, with its additive interface, outperformed its social competitors, landing near the center of the premium spectrum. The research suggests improving platform safety and content standards could change channel perceptions.



Premium in practice

The Trade Desk platform taps into OpenSincera data to assess the premium qualities of media outlets, informing smarter ad buys. Additionally, the Sellers and Publishers 500+, which represents the highest quality inventory on the platform, outperforms the rest of the open internet across the marketing funnel — driving 60% better brand awareness and a 70% lift in purchase intent.²

CONCLUSION

The strategic bottom line

As the findings reveal, the value of media cannot be measured solely by cost. Lowering spend through cheap reach may appear efficient, but it misses broader benefits that premium environments offer.

Here's what makes the difference: Your message lands in a premium environment where it belongs rather than fighting for attention against low-quality content or risky adjacencies. **According to the research, premium environments keep audiences engaged longer, and that attention is more focused and intentional.** The result is a halo effect that lifts the perception of the media brands and the advertisers within them. For marketers, the opportunity is twofold: immediate campaign effectiveness and enduring brand prestige. With these insights, advertisers can align the right premium choices to specific goals, unlocking stronger outcomes for brand equity and performance. That's the real value of premium media investment.

Sources:

1. The Value of Premium, PA Consulting and The Trade Desk Intelligence, U.S., U.K., France, June 2025.
2. Lucid Measurement by Cint, H1 2025, n=459 studies.



METHODOLOGY

What we did

Expert interviews and literature review

We held one-hour, in-depth interviews with experts across brand and marketing. We supplemented those interviews with desk research to interrogate academic behavioral science theories. The insights gave us a holistic view into the power of media brands and grounded the research in existing thinking.

Media semiotic meta-analysis

We analyzed over 60 premium media and non-premium media brands across digital, CTV, and audio. The study focused on areas including design, navigation, UX / UI considerations, underlying brand reputation, consumer perception, and trust, plus a special focus on the role of advertising in premium experiences.

Large-scale quantitative validation

We conducted a large-scale quantitative survey with 4,500 people in the U.K., U.S., and France. Testing the attributes of premium derived from the media meta-analysis to understand the key drivers of premium perceptions using a statistical trade-off technique.

Experimental implicit testing

We conducted implicit response testing with 4,650 people across the U.K., U.S., and France to explore the impact of a premium vs. non-premium media experience on subsequent perceptions of advertisers, assessing the speed and strength of associations on key indicators of premium. The tests were administered online and in person.



A media platform built for the open internet

The Trade Desk helps brands and their agencies advertise to audiences across millions of ad-supported apps, websites, and streaming providers all around the world. Our media buying platform is focused solely on the buy side and empowers advertisers with the data, transparency, and precision they need to reach and grow their audiences everywhere. We help power the content that fuels the free and open internet.

For more information, contact us at thetradedesk.com/contact-us.