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TV audiences have shifted

Ad dollars have not

The need for content intelligence in the CTV era

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Streaming has become the dominant way people engage with their televisions. The shift has encouraged a significant increase in advertising over the past decade, with industry projections for this year exceeding $30 billion. Growth forecasts notwithstanding, linear TV budgets remain outsized by comparison, highlighting a notable disparity.

- The IAB expects a 14% increase in CTV spending this year.
- The average viewer spends more time each week with CTV than traditional, live TV programming.
- CTV spending isn't projected to overshadow linear TV spending until 2028.

Media agencies and advertisers see tremendous potential in CTV advertising, and they overwhelmingly agree that they would direct more of their linear budgets in that direction if it weren't for one key barrier: a lack of information.

- 47% of media planners cite limited program data as a barrier to shifting linear dollars to CTV.
- 98% of TV buyers say show-level placement is important for campaign success.
- 91% of programmatic traders say they frequently struggle to explain CTV performance to planners and clients because of limited content-level transparency.

The upside is large, especially through the lens of ad waste, which data company Truthset pegs at more than $7 billion simply because of bad data signals.

- 86% of media planners say they would shift more linear dollars to CTV if show-level targeting was available.
- 56% of TV buyers say show-level targeting would make CTV a more compelling buy.
- 53% of programmatic traders say show-level data would significantly improve campaign optimization.

Audiences have shifted to CTV, and brands and agencies are steadily investing to keep pace—and build brand awareness. But to truly right-size budget allocations so they're in step with audience engagement, content transparency for brands and agencies is critical in an environment where 85% of ad buying happens programmatically.

Welcome

For television audiences, the shift to CTV is well underway. For advertisers, not so much.

That's not to say that ad dollars aren't headed to CTV. They are. In fact, CTV remains one of the strongest growth engines across the TV landscape. This year, the IAB and EMARKETER each expect CTV ad spend to increase 14%, representing a stark contrast from the 2% decline that they expect across traditional, linear TV.

These projections, however, mask the lopsided nature of how advertisers and agencies are investing across the TV ecosystem. Despite the shift to CTV among viewers, linear TV budgets remain outsized. Instead of reallocating, brands and media agencies are simply growing their total spend to ensure that CTV is in the mix.

As a result, CTV spending continues to rise, but its allotted share remains overshadowed by funding earmarked for traditional TV. While ad spend growth is a net positive, there is a disconnect in the current trendlines, especially as many ad buyers express increasing challenges with respect to their traditional linear spending.

The reason preventing planners and buyers from shifting linear dollars to CTV? A lack of information. Said plainly, without show-level data for CTV targeting and reporting, planners, buyers and programmatic traders are all flying blind.

CTV is the new normal among TV viewers, but linear TV spending remains dominant among brands and agencies

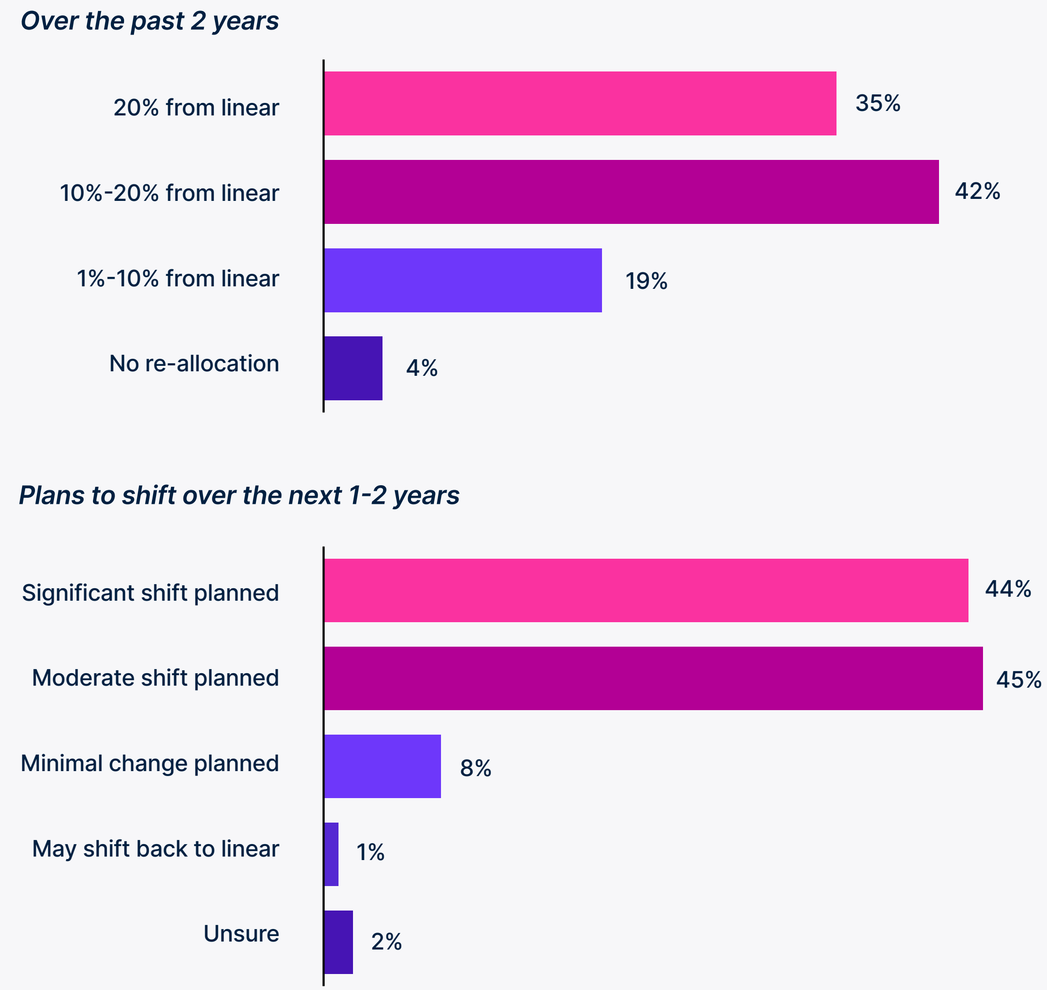
CTV is all grown up, but buying ads in it isn't

Far removed from its roots as an experimental add-on, CTV is now a critical component of any holistic ad strategy. Investment in CTV from advertisers and agencies continues to rise, with EMARKETER's projected growth bringing spend to just under $38 billion in the U.S. this year.

While keeping pace with viewing behavior, the growing CTV investment also reflects an evolved expectation regarding ROI: The IAB's 2026 advertising outlook cites customer acquisition as media buyers' top objective for their CTV spend in the year ahead.

In step with industry forecasts, the brand and media agency associates surveyed for Gracenote's 2026 CTV advertising study universally say they've increased their CTV spending over the past two years, some of which has been at the expense of their linear budgets—a trend they say will continue.

Media planners are shifting ad dollars to CTV from linear



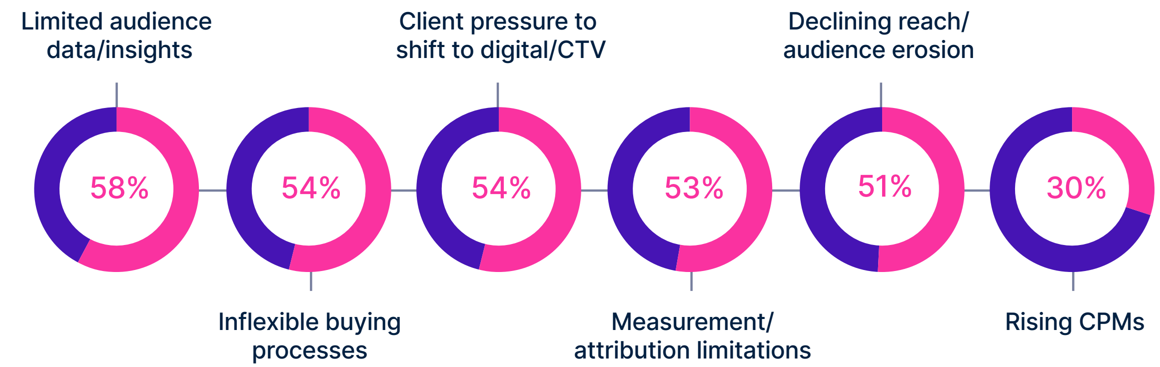
Read as: 35% of media planners say they have moved 20% or more of their linear TV budgets to CTV over the past two years.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

Future plans notwithstanding, the big picture illuminates a significant hesitation to allocate funds more strategically. Spend forecasts from EMARKETER, for example, don't have CTV spending surpassing linear until 2028, even though CTV usage eclipsed traditional live TV viewing at the start of 2025[1]. And even when CTV spending does take the lead, it will do so by only 2%.

Perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the fact that TV buyers are starting to face headwinds with their traditional linear buys, including insufficient audience data and pressure from clients to shift to CTV.

Top challenges when buying ads for linear TV

Among TV buyers



Read as: 58% of TV buyers cite limited audience data as a top challenge when buying linear TV advertising.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

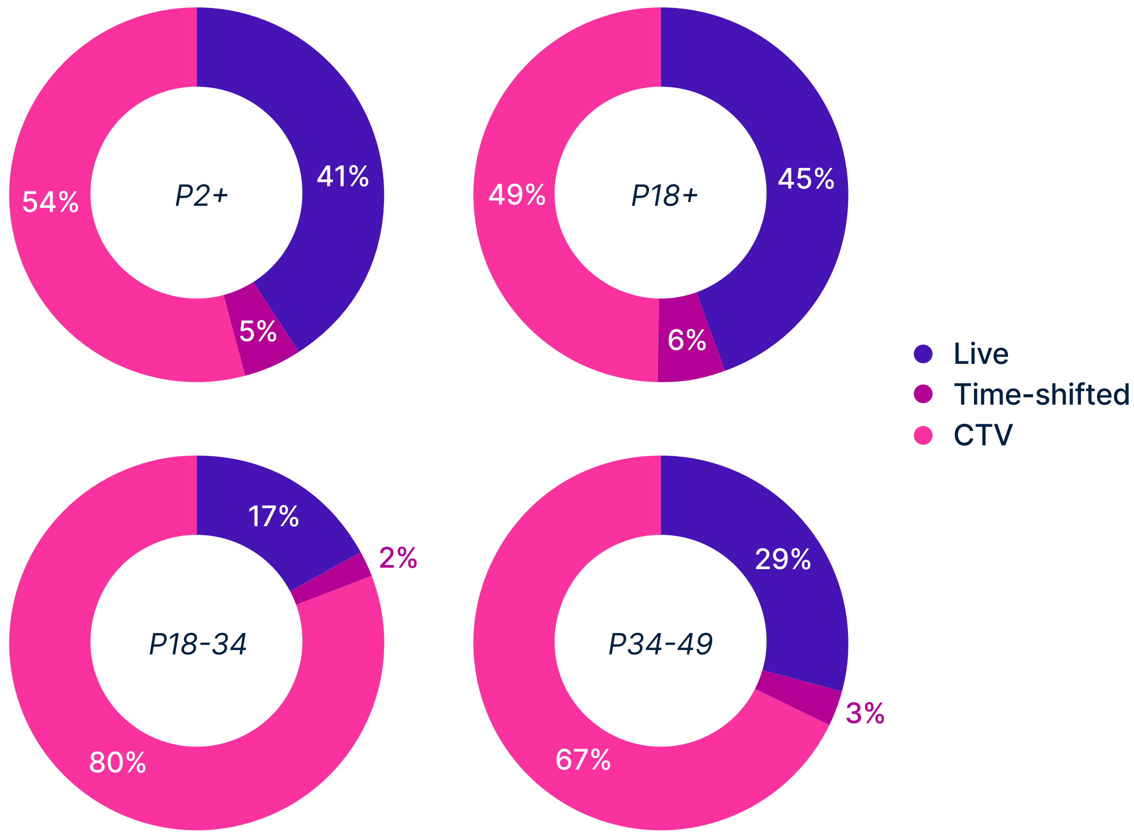
Amid rising privacy regulations, audience data has become increasingly challenging to come by. Data about content, on the other hand, poses no privacy risk and should be in ample supply. But in CTV, the lack of information about content is inhibiting more balanced ad strategies, largely because of how much ad buying is handled programmatically.

[1] Nielsen Audience insights via Nielsen NPOWER and Nielsen Media Impact

New objectives face new challenges

For consumers, CTV offers a much different value proposition than it did 10 years ago. It also represents a much bigger portion of their media diets. Similar to how streaming has accounted for more viewing time than broadcast and cable combined since May 2025[2], time with CTV overtook traditional live TV viewing more than a year ago. At year-end 2025, it had grown to account for 54% among people 2 and older. Among younger audiences, CTV use is much more dominant[3].

How we divide our time with TV



Read as: People 2 and older spend 41% of their time with television watching traditional, live TV programming.
Sources: Q4 2025 Nielsen NPOWER, Nielsen Media Impact

[2] Nielsen's The Gauge
[3] Q4 2025 Nielsen NPOWER, Nielsen Media Impact

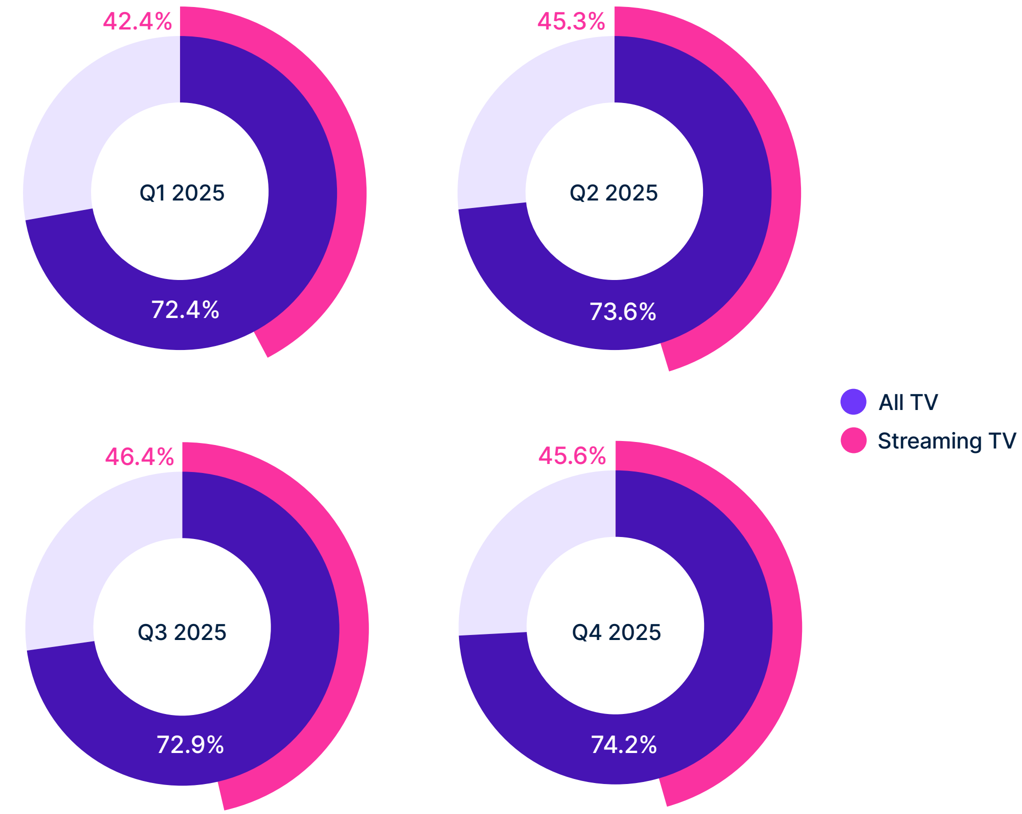
Brand awareness is the top objective for CTV spending among brands and agencies

- 2025 Gracenote trends in CTV advertising survey

Given its digital nature, CTV allows advertisers to be much more flexible with their marketing objectives than they can be with traditional television. While brands and agencies have started tapping into CTV to build brand awareness and reach new audiences, the digital nature of the channel also allows marketers to fulfill full-funnel objectives.

Across the board, the TV landscape is ripe with opportunity, as more than 74% of all TV viewing now involves ad-supported content. Advertising is also becoming more common across premium streaming services[4].

Ad-supported TV continues to gain momentum



Read as: In Q1 2025, 72.4% of all TV programming was ad-supported.
Source: Nielsen's The Gauge

64% **of U.S. TV viewers pay for ad-supported streaming services**

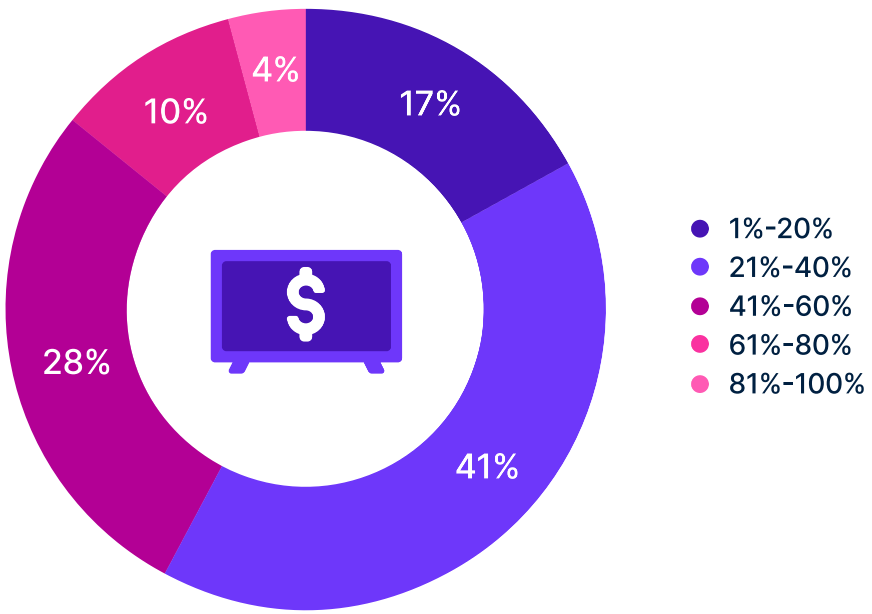
- 2025 Gracenote streaming consumer survey

[4] Source: Nielsen's The Gauge

Content transparency is hindering CTV ad spend

This new reality notwithstanding, TV and CTV budgets remain unbalanced. In step with industry data, the media planners surveyed for our 2026 CTV advertising study cite significant linear TV allocations in their annual ad budgets. Across media channels, 42% say they allocate 41% or more of their total budgets to linear TV, with 14% dedicating 61% or more.

Linear TV budget allocations
Among media planners

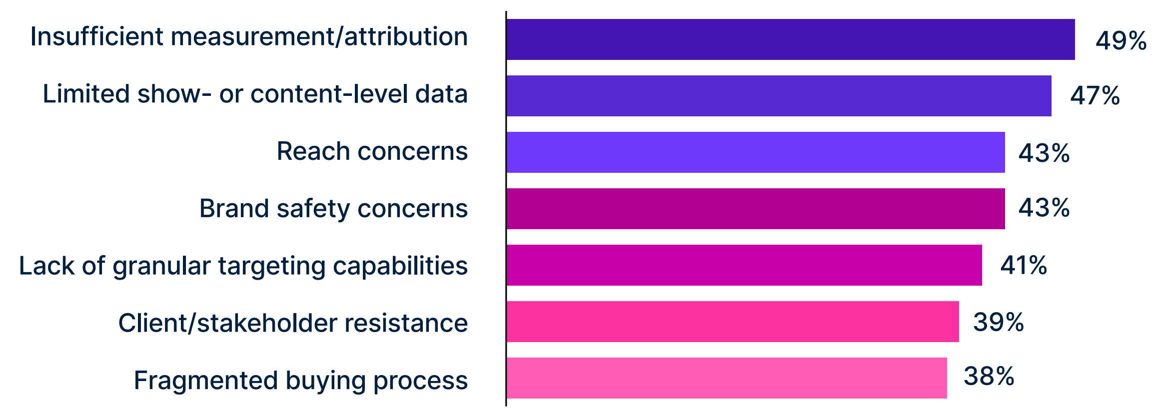


Read as: 28% of media planners allocate 41%-60% of their budgets to linear TV.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

Importantly, media planners cite content data as a significant factor in their budget allocations, with 86% saying they would be able to shift more dollars to CTV if they had access to show-level data for targeting and reporting purposes.

Additionally, nearly 60% say show-level data would help with client buy-in. In the current environment, however, they say that content transparency is a key barrier preventing them from shifting more investment to CTV.

Primary barriers preventing more dollars from shifting to CTV
Among media planners



Read as: 49% of media planners say insufficient measurement capabilities is a primary barrier preventing them from shifting more funding to CTV.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

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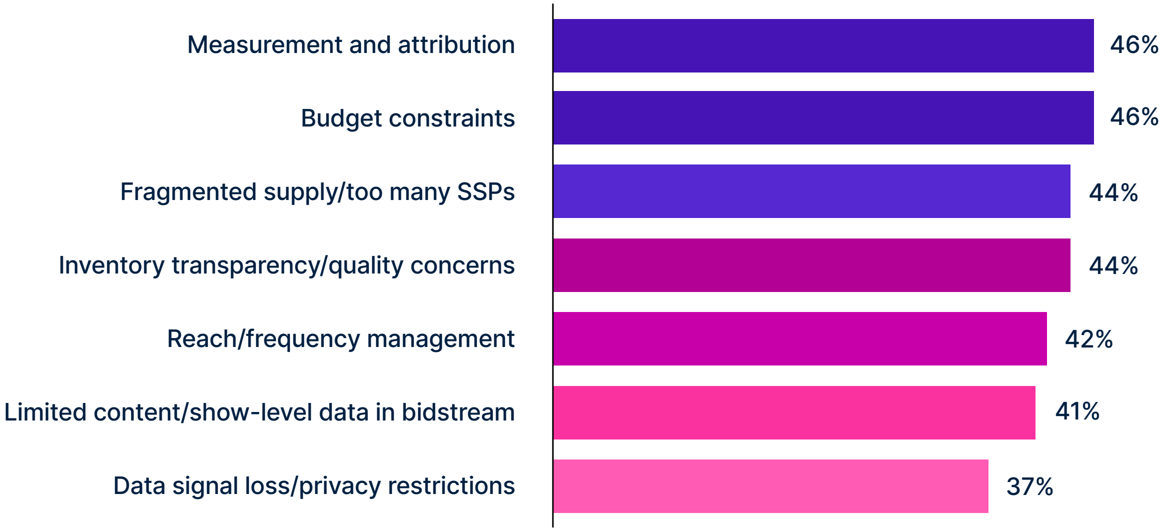
At the execution level, linear buyers say they have the flexibility to shift budget between linear and CTV, but cite the importance of show-level placement in campaign success. Here, 40% say the lack of show-level data puts CTV at a disadvantage, particularly as 75% buy CTV inventory programmatically.

Sentiment from programmatic traders is similar, as 91% say the lack of content- and show-level data is a limiting factor in their CTV campaigns. Limited content metadata is also at the heart of two of their top challenges in CTV advertising, although budget constraints could be linked to lackluster campaign reporting caused by missing content signals.

Top challenges when buying CTV inventory
Among programmatic traders



SSPs: Sell-side providers.
Read as: 46% of programmatic traders say measurement and attribution are key challenges when buying CTV inventory.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

Missing signals = missing opportunities

Outside of premier content, some of which is bundled into deals made during the upfronts, ads across the CTV landscape are largely handled programmatically. In its latest digital video spend report, the IAB highlights that 85% of CTV inventory is purchased programmatically, which is up from 75% a year earlier.

44% of programmatic traders cite content transparency as a top challenge when buying CTV inventory

- 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

In addition to improved programmatic technology, much of the increased use over the past decade stems from the growing breadth of the CTV landscape, which is far too sprawling for one-off ad deals. The increasing fragmentation is particularly tricky in high-value sports programming.

Here's an example:

The 2026 NCAA College Football Championship game was broadcast Jan. 19, 2026, across 167 national and local ESPN affiliates[6]. While this inventory was likely sold well in advance of the game, the inventory that was broadcast across the more than 5,300 individual CTV distributors[5] that carried the game was less likely to have been.

From an advertiser perspective, the game was massive, pulling in 30.1 million viewers[6], the biggest audience for a college football game since the inaugural CFP National Championship for the 2014-15 season.

Importantly, this massive audience was not confined to a single channel. It was dispersed across a very fragmented TV landscape, including the thousands of CTV distribution points, which included an array of vMVPD[7] providers like DirecTV, Fubo, Sling and YouTube TV. As a result, the total CTV distribution was more than 31 times larger than the traditional, linear distribution.

[5] Gracenote streaming and linear availability data
[6] Nielsen Big Data + Panel data
[7] Virtual multichannel video programming distributor

Assessing the absence of program-level metadata

The sentiment from media agencies about content transparency isn't without merit. One of the biggest challenges, however, is standardization. Without it, the degree of insufficient data across the CTV advertising landscape is wildly inconsistent.

Currently, individual publishers pick and choose which content signals they pass to advertisers in programmatic bidstreams. Sell-side providers (SSPs) are similarly inconsistent, providing varying degrees of program signals—even for content from the same publisher.

Sample SSP data for a single publisher

SSP provider	% series defined	% titles defined	% networks defined	% channels defined
SSP 1	72.3%	65.4%	85.9%	97.9%
SSP 2	70.3%	6.1%	90.1%	98.8%
SSP 3	53.1%	27.6%	81.6%	93.9%

Read as: SSP 1 provided 72.3% of the series information for the publisher's inventory in its programmatic bidstream data.
Source: Rain The Growth Agency

As a result, there is a true absence of concrete, reliable signals about the content people are watching. According to a March 2026 analysis of industrywide bid request data by contextual data company Peer39, only 40% contain usable program-level content signals. Within that 40%, however, data transparency is very limited, as 33% has some genre data available and 7% has shallow or inaccurate genre data.

47% of media planners say limited content data is a primary barrier preventing them from shifting more budget from linear to CTV

- 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

This lack of inventory transparency is a major driver of ad waste. In its Q2 2025 Programmatic Benchmark report, the ANA reported $26.8 billion in global ad waste due to programmatic inefficiencies, with CTV representing 44% of total spend.

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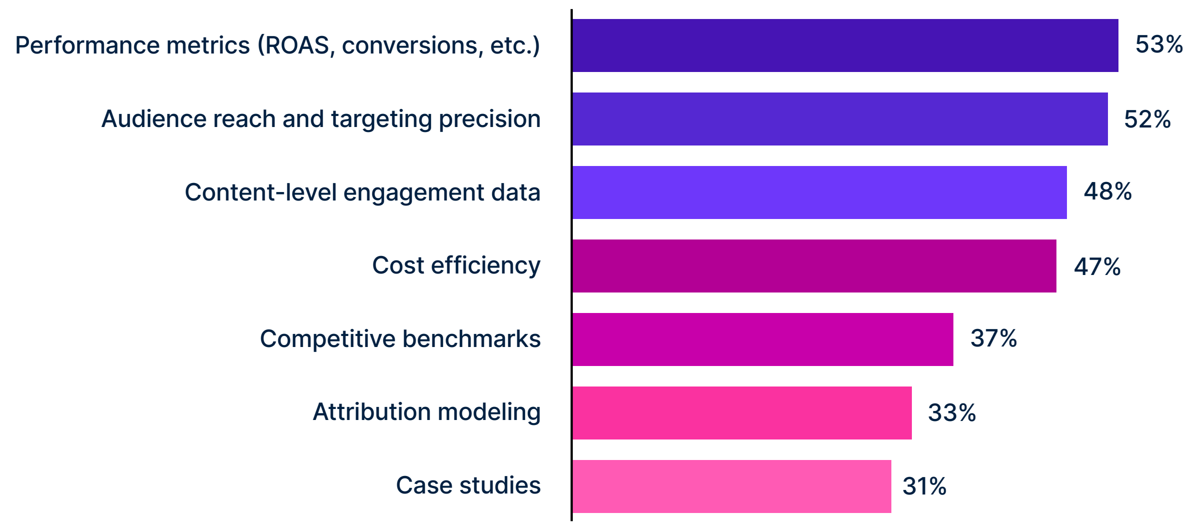
Advancing CTV ad effectiveness and value with content-level data

For media agencies, the lack of content signals represents a consistent barrier to the advancement of efficiency and accuracy of advertising in CTV. While genre—the lone attribute identified in Peer39's bid request analysis—provides some information, it lacks the robustness needed for comprehensive ad planning and execution. The range of content within a single genre is also generally too broad to provide any meaningful guidance.

Knowing that a program has a drama genre isn't enough to inform specific ad buys

For media planners, the sparse amount of available content data puts CTV at a disadvantage from a budget perspective, with 40% classifying the disadvantage as significant or moderate.

Support for increased CTV investment
Among media planners



Read as: 53% of media planners say performance metrics are the most influential factors when advocating for greater CTV investment.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

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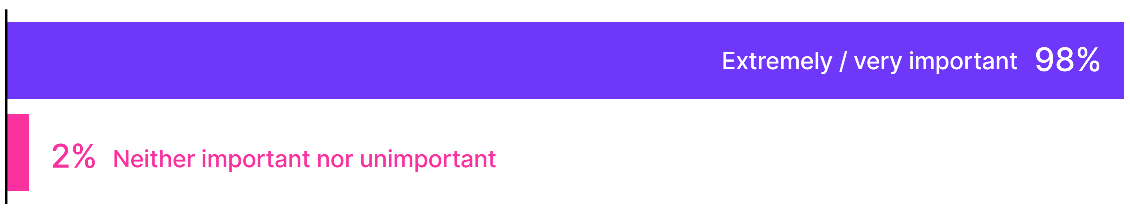
Ad buyers have similar feelings about the scarcity of content data, noting that the lack of signals represents a major barrier to further CTV ad adoption. At the same time, however, they universally agree that the targeting capabilities in CTV are better than in traditional TV.

98% of TV buyers say media planners and clients frequently question the value of linear TV relative to CTV

- 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

Combined, the rise in engagement with CTV and the granular targeting it facilitates are key factors that inspire questions from planners and clients about the value of traditional, linear TV. Right now, the answer hinges on a cornerstone of campaign success: show-level ad placement.

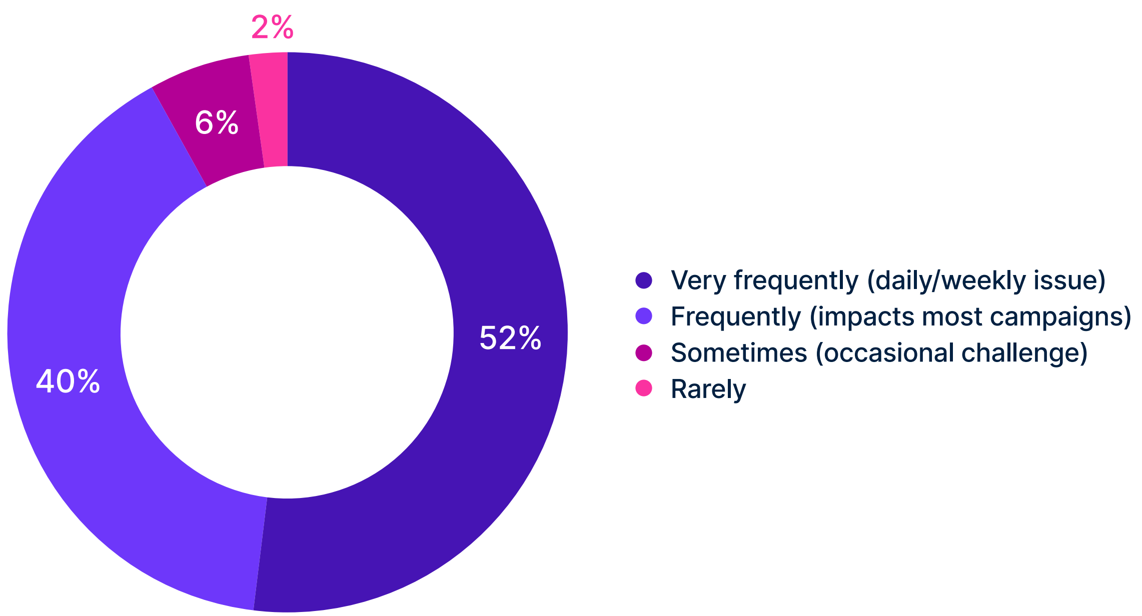
Show-level data is critical for TV campaign success



Read as: 98% of TV buyers say show-level placement is extremely / very important in campaign success.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

From a performance perspective, programmatic traders universally cite difficulties with campaign optimization as a result of insufficient content- and show-level data. TV schedule data can help here, as advertisers could replicate their TV buys in streaming environments to capitalize on the buys they already know are successful—down to the show level—and reach a new audience while doing it.

Insufficient content data limits CTV campaign optimization

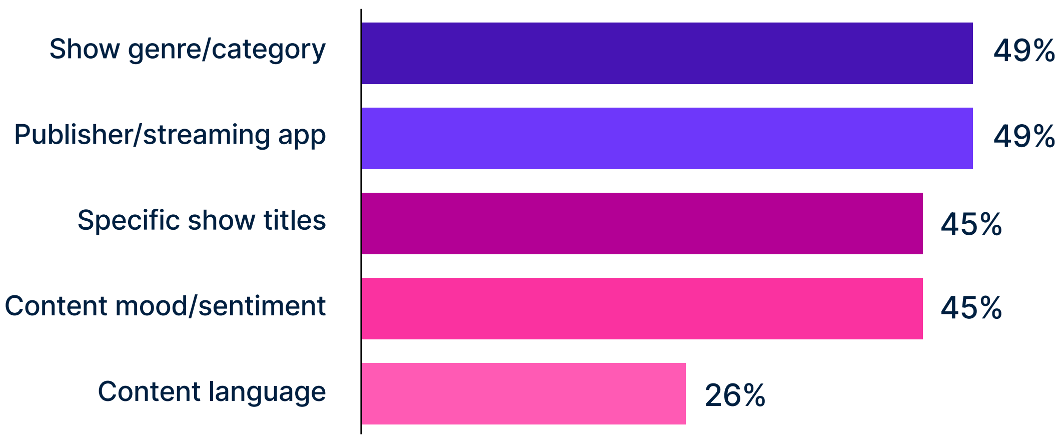


Read as: 52% of programmatic traders say insufficient content data is very frequently a limiting factor in CTV campaign optimization
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

The data that advertisers and agencies want

From a targeting perspective, genre is only the tip of the iceberg, and it remains largely elusive. That fact notwithstanding, 95% of TV buyers agree that brand-building campaigns in CTV can deliver strategic value in the same way that linear TV can. Similarly, programmatic traders say standardized and show-level data would dramatically change how they go about their jobs; and 89% say it would make CTV more effective.

The content data that media planners want



Read as: 49% of media planners say that show genre and category data would be valuable for CTV campaign planning.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

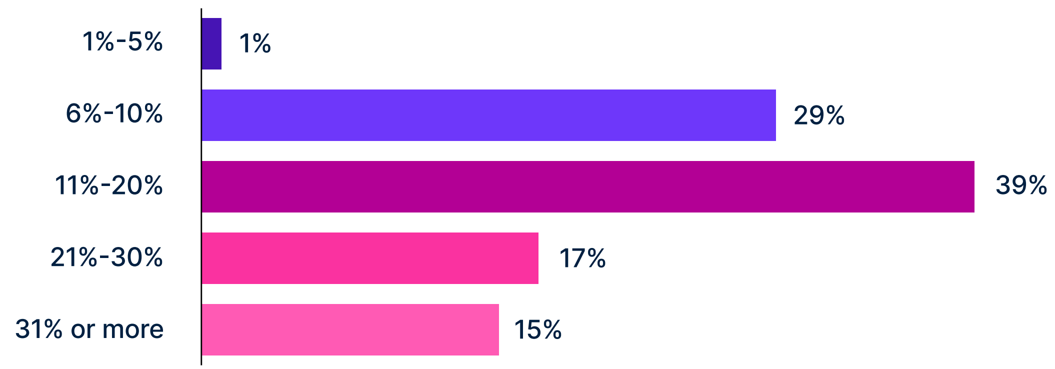
31% of media planners say they would move 21% or more of their linear budgets to CTV if show-level targeting and reporting were available

- 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

Perhaps more importantly, however, is the impact that the availability of this data would have on CTV budgets. In total, 86% of media planners say they would move more dollars to CTV if show-level data was consistently available.

The impact of show-level content signals on CTV spending

Among media planners

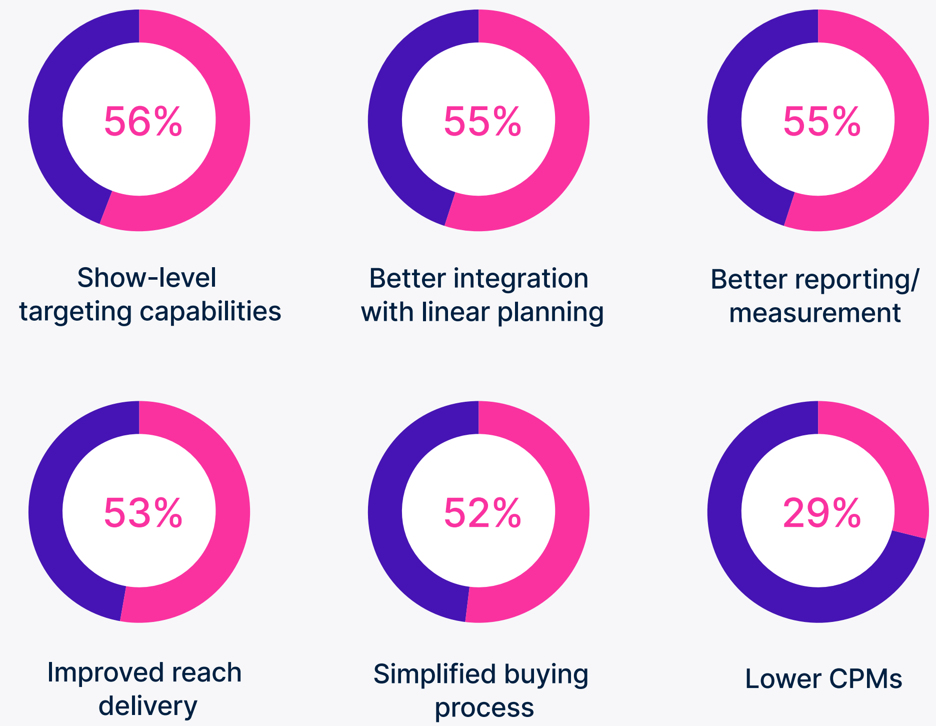


Read as: 1% of media buyers would shift 1%-5% of their budgets to CTV if show-level targeting and reporting were available.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

For TV buyers, program-level data is among the top factors that would better showcase the value that CTV adds to stakeholders and clients.

Top factors that would make CTV a more compelling buy

Among media planners



Read as: 56% of TV buyers say show-level targeting is among the top three things that would make CTV a more compelling buy in the budgets they manage.
Source: 2026 Gracenote CTV advertising survey

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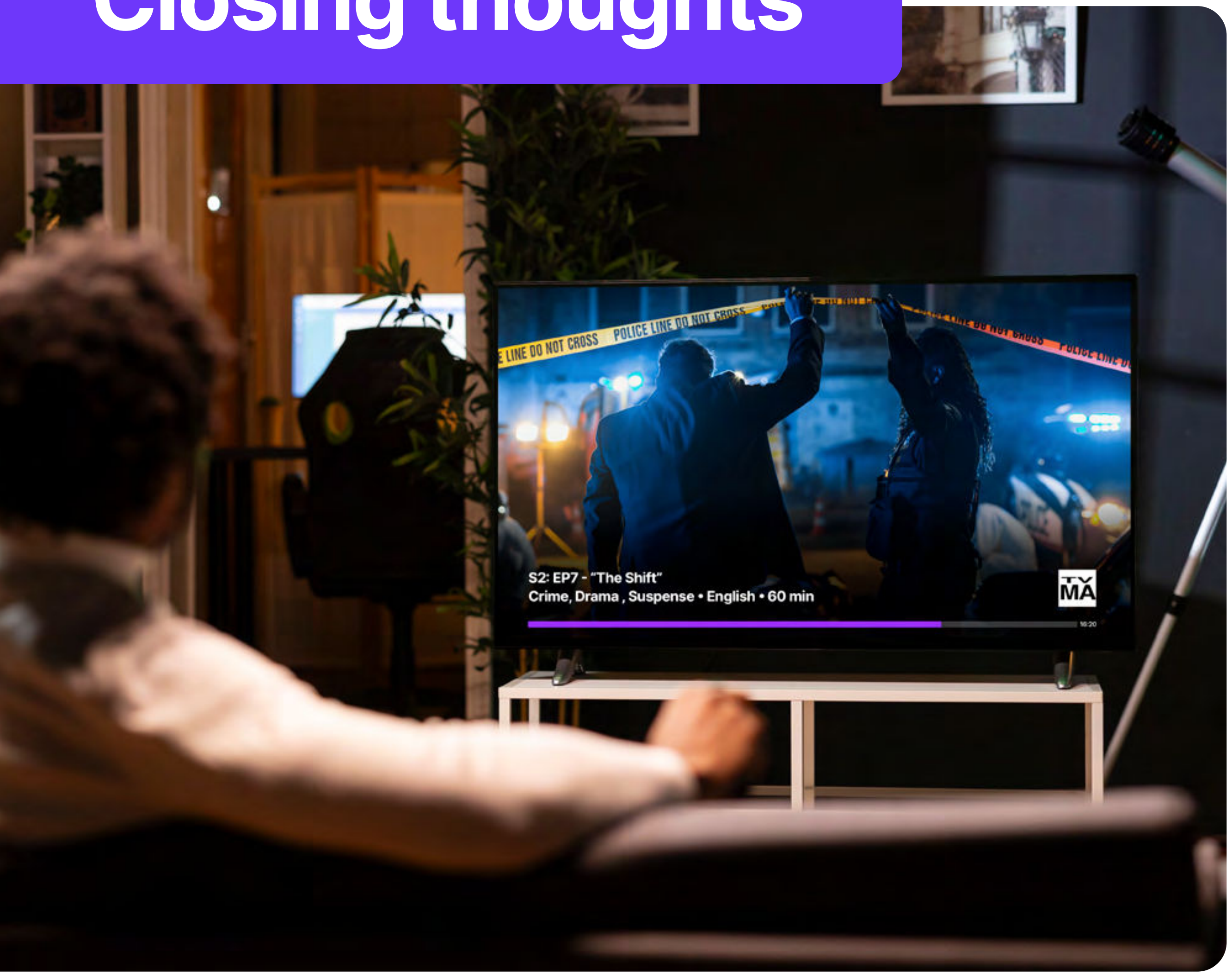
Closing thoughts



Advertisers' desire to buy TV the way they watch it is a fairly simple ask. The programmatic infrastructure that facilitates CTV advertising, however, has yet to catch up to the modern way people engage with their televisions. That's because it was built to pass audience signals, not content signals. So, the lag is largely the result of a mismatch between intended use and desired use.

Content transparency represents a notable blind spot for advertisers, but there are ways to navigate the challenges. Knowing how to evaluate whether a campaign is flying blind is critical, as is knowing which content signals to demand from advertising partners.

Here are some key questions advertisers and DSPs should be asking their supply side partners:

- What types of content metadata are available in bid requests?
- What percentage of bid requests include usable content metadata?
- Do bid requests for sports distinguish between live games and other sports-related programming?
- Are standardized, third-party IDs being used, or is publisher-supplied data that can be inconsistent across platforms being used?
- How are you helping advertisers manage brand suitability for their campaigns?
- How are you helping brands ensure premium content placements?
- Does post-campaign reporting provide insight into the content that viewers saw?

Given the complexity of the ecosystem, no single company can unilaterally solve the challenges associated with advancing data transparency for advertising. Rather, all players must contribute to making content intelligence available. And importantly, we're already seeing signs of this happening.

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Content targeting delivers scale and precision

Very recently, Mexican beer brand Dos Equis included CTV in an omnichannel college football campaign, but it wanted assurance that its ads would only appear in 2026 College Football Playoff games and associated shoulder programming.

To execute, dentsu X, working with Index Exchange as a preferred sell-side provider (SSP), used Gracenote's content-level data to activate a segment of CFP games and shoulder programming across premium streaming inventory, creating a closed-loop solution, from activation through post-campaign reporting.

The results?

84%
of impressions aired on live CFP games

7%
under CPM benchmark

100%
of impressions aired within college football content

The key takeaway for brands and agencies: Don't let show-level reporting prevent you from moving budgets to CTV.

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DATA SOURCES

Gracenote 2026 CTV advertising survey

This report includes survey responses from 500 media planners, TV buyers and programmatic traders from U.S. media agencies and brand advertisers. The survey was conducted online and was fielded March 5-March 23, 2026.

Gracenote Global Video Data

Gracenote Video Data provides comprehensive TV show and movie metadata covering titles, descriptions, genres and more across 80+ countries and territories in 70+ languages. Gracenote provides detailed TV listings data for 75,000+ linear channels, nearly 2,100 FAST channels, along with availability for 260+ streaming catalogs.

Gracenote 2025 Trends in CTV advertising survey

This report includes survey responses from U.S. brand and agency associates with influence or oversight of marketing and advertising spend. Respondents work across a variety of industries and have titles of director and above. Industries of focus included media and entertainment, telecom, retail, financial services, automotive, CPG and health care/pharmaceutical. The survey was conducted online and was fielded July 10-July 20, 2025. The report data reflects the responses from a total of 600 respondents.

The Gauge™

The Gauge is Nielsen’s monthly snapshot of total broadcast, cable and streaming consumption that occurs through a television screen, providing the industry with a holistic look at what audiences are watching. The data for The Gauge is derived from two separately weighted panels and combined to create the graphic. Nielsen’s streaming data is derived from a subset of Streaming Meter-enabled TV households within the National TV panel. The linear TV sources (broadcast and cable), as well as total usage are based on viewing from Nielsen’s overall TV panel.

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