

# Retail Media Networks vs. Google Ads

*A Guide to Choosing the Right  
Channel for your Brand Growth*



## **Retail Media vs. Google Ads: Which is the Right Choice for your Brand?**

There is no shortage of ad placement options for today's advertisers, but there are two staples that should be included in every brand strategy: the tried-and-true Google Ads and the explosive power of retail media networks. Spoiler alert: the smartest brands know the answer isn't either/or — it's both. But when budgets, goals, and resources are on the line, how do you decide where to start?

At Code3, we've got experts on both platforms, so we're breaking down what each platform offers, when to lean into each, and why a combined strategy is often the gold standard.

### **Understanding the Power of Retail Media Networks and Google Ads**

Whether you're a seasoned marketer or new to digital advertising, one thing is clear: Google Ads remains a dominant force in capturing consumer intent. It's still the default starting point for many people looking for solutions, and reaches billions of users a month through search, YouTube, display ads, and more.

With over 8.5 billion searches per day and a robust ecosystem that includes Search, YouTube, Display, Shopping, and Performance Max, Google offers brands the chance to reach users across every stage of the funnel. From discovery to conversion, its platforms offer unmatched reach — YouTube alone has over 2.5 billion monthly users.

What sets Google apart is its ability to meet consumers wherever they are in their journey: when they're curious, comparing, or ready to act. Whether someone is searching for a solution, watching product reviews, or browsing relevant content, Google is able to keep brands visible and actionable. Google Ads have smart bidding, audience insights, and performance-driven campaign types, making them able to drive meaningful engagement and real business outcomes at scale.

But retail media networks (think Amazon, Walmart, Target and more) are rising fast. These platforms have a secret weapon: they're embedded directly in the shopping experience. Ads are served to consumers already in buying mode, and brands can track the full path from impression to purchase. Beyond the giants, emerging networks like Instacart Ads and Ulta Beauty's UB Media offer increasingly valuable niche audiences that are ideal for brands looking to diversify their retail media investments.

Additionally, retail media networks are increasingly offering programmatic solutions, which allow brands to extend audiences beyond retailer-owned inventory and build brand awareness on the open web. This evolution blurs the line between retail media and traditional digital buys.

**The big takeaway:** Both platforms are powerful. Success isn't about choosing one over the other; it's about understanding when each shines brightest and when combining them creates unstoppable momentum. So, let's dive into the strengths of each. —————>

## THE STRENGTHS OF RETAIL MEDIA NETWORKS

- ✔ **Direct Path to Purchase**  
Retail media networks offer an unbeatable advantage: immediate access to purchase-ready consumers. Ads are integrated directly into marketplaces like Amazon or Walmart, so when a user clicks, they're just a step away from buying. Plus, closed-loop attribution means advertisers can see exactly how ads translate into real revenue.
- ✔ **Leveraging First-Party Data for Precision Targeting**  
As third-party cookies crumble, first-party data is the new king. Retailers like Amazon have a treasure trove of shopper data—browsing habits, purchase history, cart additions, and more that brands can tap into for pinpoint targeting. This is targeting Google can't always match, especially when it comes to actual purchase behavior.
- ✔ **Seamless Integration with Shopping Journeys**  
On retail media networks, ads don't feel like ads, they feel like part of the shopping experience. Whether it's a sponsored product showing up during a search or a video ad embedded on a product page, it's a natural nudge toward purchase without the friction of hopping between platforms.
- ✔ **Omnichannel Advantage**  
Retailers like Target aren't stopping at digital. Their omnichannel strategies connect online ads with in-store experiences. Picture this: a consumer sees your ad on Target.com and then notices your product in a physical store later that day. That's brand reinforcement retailers can uniquely deliver.
- ✔ **Emerging Attribution Solutions**  
Innovations like Amazon Marketing Cloud (AMC) and Walmart Luminate are empowering advertisers to get deeper visibility into customer journeys — from impression to conversion — improving strategic decisions beyond the traditional 90-day window.

## THE STRENGTHS OF GOOGLE ADS

- ✔ **Massive Reach Across the Web**  
When it comes to sheer reach, Google Ads is unmatched. From Search to Display to YouTube, Google gives brands access to billions of users across the entire internet ecosystem, making it a top choice for awareness plays and capturing users in the early stages of the buying journey.
- ✔ **Flexibility and Sophistication in Campaign Setup**  
Performance Max campaigns take a lot of heavy lifting off advertisers' plates by automating optimization across multiple Google surfaces. Plus, Google Ads' reporting capabilities are top-tier, allowing brands to dig into years' worth of data for deep insights, a leg up for brands that want to build smarter strategies over time.
- ✔ **Profitability & Direct-to-Consumer Growth**  
For many DTC brands, Google Ads often drives better profit margins. Without retailer fees or platform markups, brands can take home a bigger slice of the pie. Google is also better equipped for lead gen, brand awareness, and long-tail search strategies that drive steady growth.
- ✔ **Intent-Based Targeting and Omnichannel Influence**  
Retail Media largely targets users who are purchase-ready, & Google Ads taps into real-time intent signals — from search queries and video views to content engagement across the web. This allows brands to reach consumers before they've chosen a retailer, influencing consideration earlier in the path to purchase.
- ✔ **Smarter Targeting with First-Party Data**  
As privacy regulations evolve and third-party cookies fade out, Google Ads offers brands robust first-party data integration. They can securely upload their own customer data like CRM lists, purchase history, or loyalty data and use it to create custom audiences, enhance targeting, and fuel Smart Bidding strategies.

## Factors to Consider When Choosing a Platform

### Audience Behavior and Purchase Path

Ask yourself: where is your audience? If they're Googling "best protein powder," Google is your starting line. If they're already adding items to their cart on Amazon, retail media advertising gets you closer to the finish line faster. Don't forget that your audience can be doing both of those things!

### Budget and Resource Allocation

A tight budget might make Google Ads more appealing, where reach can often be scaled more affordably. On the flip side, retail media placements, especially premium spots, can get pricey fast, making them better suited for brands with a little more to spend upfront.

### Business Goals: Profitability vs. Volume

Having a laser focus on your overall advertising goals is critical here, and could make the strategic decision a no-brainer. Need maximum revenue and brand exposure fast? Retail media networks could be your play. Focused on maximizing profit margins and growing your customer base long term? Google Ads might be the smarter bet.

## Why Using Both Channels is the Gold Standard

### Full-Funnel Marketing Coverage

Google Ads are known for building brand awareness during research, but also does much more. Beyond brand awareness, Google Ads positions brands to influence decisions, drive engagement, and convert consumers during research moments. On the other hand, retail media advertising captures shoppers when they're ready to buy. Working together, they create a full-funnel powerhouse that keeps your brand top-of-mind from consideration to conversion.

### Meeting Consumers Across Touchpoints

Today's consumers don't take a linear path to purchase. They bounce from research to comparison to checkout across multiple devices and platforms. A presence on both Google and retail media channels ensures your brand is there — whenever and wherever your customer is ready to act.

## Challenges and Limitations to Keep in Mind

### Fragmentation and Platform Management

Full-funnel marketing coverage is always the dream, but it's sometimes easier said than done. Here's the real talk: running both retail media networks and Google Ads means juggling different UIs, bidding processes, and attribution models. It's more complex, but for brands who manage it well, the payoff is worth it.

### Reporting and Attribution Gaps

While Google Ads lets you dive deep into historical performance, many retail media platforms limit easy access to older data (looking at you, Amazon's 90-day reporting window). If long-term data analysis is key to your strategy, plan for additional tools or third-party platforms to fill those gaps.

At the end of the day, the smartest brands know **it's not a fight between retail media networks and Google Ads—it's a balancing act**. By understanding your goals, knowing your audience, and realistically assessing your resources, you can build a strategy that taps into the best of both worlds.

Want help figuring out the right mix for your brand? Let's talk. Code3's experts are here to turn strategy into success.

## KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE INVESTING



### Audience & Shopping Behavior

- ☐ Where does your target audience shop, browse, and research?
- ☐ Are they brand-loyal or price-sensitive?
- ☐ Do they shop online, in-store, or both?
- ☐ Are they more likely to discover your product through a search engine, retailer site, or social media?



### Marketing & Business Objectives

- ☐ What are your primary goals: profit or volume?
- ☐ Are you aiming to drive volume (revenue) or efficiency (profit margins)?
- ☐ Are you focused on short-term sales or long-term brand growth?
- ☐ Is this campaign for acquisition, retention, or a full-funnel strategy?
- ☐ Do you need support for brand awareness, performance, or both?



### Budget & Resources

- ☐ What is your monthly media budget and how flexible is it?
- ☐ Can your team manage multiple ad platforms or do you need centralized reporting and execution?
- ☐ Do you have internal or external partners to support creative, analytics, and optimization?



### Data & Measurement Requirements

- ☐ What reporting capabilities do you need?
- ☐ What attribution model do you use or need to use?
- ☐ Do you require visibility into multi-touch journeys or closed-loop conversion data?
- ☐ How important is historical performance data to your forecasting or optimizations?
- ☐ Are you using third-party tools or retailer-specific solutions like AMC or Luminate?



### Technical Infrastructure & Readiness

- ☐ What stage of the funnel are you trying to impact first — awareness, consideration, or conversion?
- ☐ Is your product catalog optimized across all platforms (images, titles, descriptions)?
- ☐ Are you able to sync budgets, creatives, and promotions across multiple channels?
- ☐ Is your team trained to interpret platform-specific KPIs like TACoS, ROAS, and incrementality?
- ☐ Are you set up to manage multiple platforms effectively?
- ☐ Do you have creative assets that align with each platform's strengths?
- ☐ Are your competitors investing heavily in the same channels? If so, how will you differentiate?
- ☐ Do you have accurate tracking in place (pixels, GA4, conversions)?

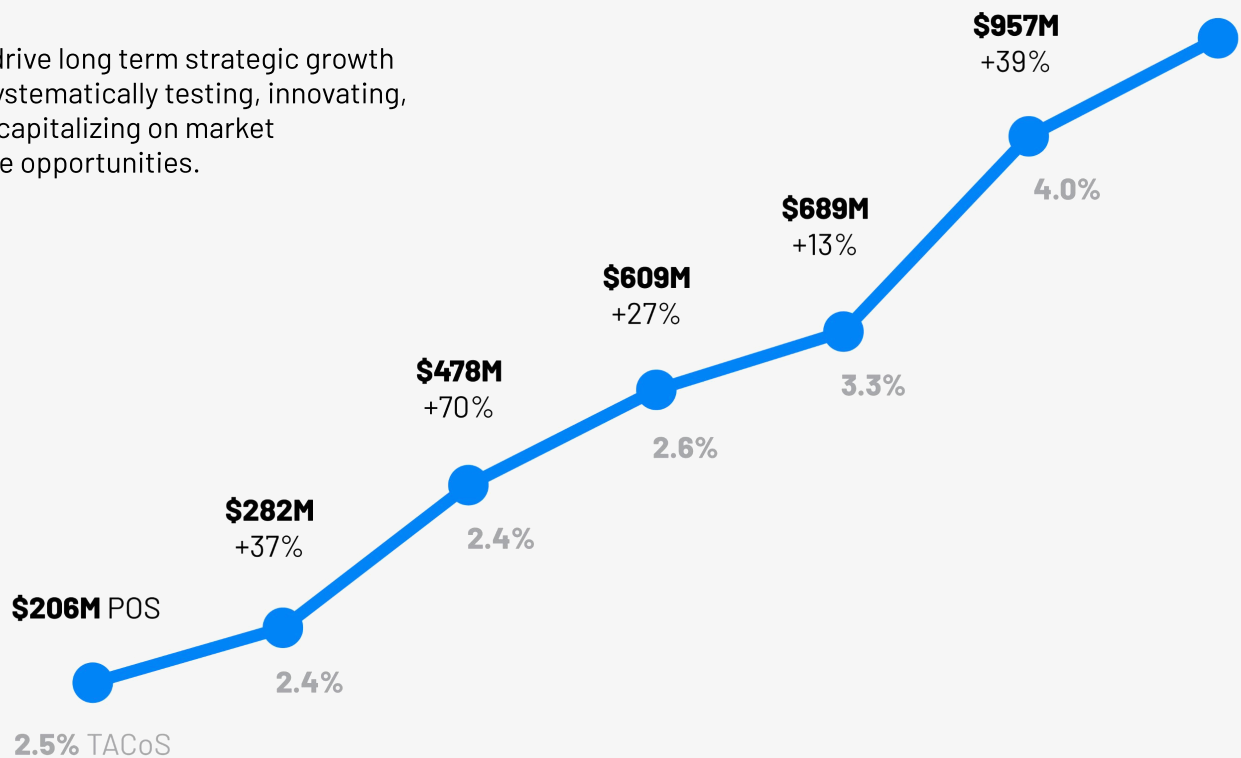


### Channel Mix Fit

- ☐ Where do Google Ads and retail media fit into your larger marketing strategy (social, email, programmatic, etc.)?
- ☐ Are you prepared to integrate insights across these platforms for holistic decision-making?
- ☐ Will investing in one channel cannibalize performance in another, or complement it?

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