

# The MFA Report 2024: From Made for Advertising to Made for Attention

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## Executive summary

Recent research from the Association of National Advertisers shows that low-quality websites are a major reason why 23% of programmatic ad spend is essentially squandered. This amounts to more than USD\$100bn (£78.3bn) in wasted ad budget per year.

A primary subset of these low-quality domains are “made for advertising” (MFA) websites. Defined as low-quality sites designed with the specific purpose of advertising arbitrage, MFA websites have proved to be a quandary for the ecosystem. On the one hand, these are low-quality environments with low organic traffic, high ads-to-content ratios, generic content from higher-quality sources, and rapidly refreshing slots designed to capture as much ad spend as possible. On the other, they look fabulous on paper to advertisers focused on legacy metrics focused on high measurability, availability of inventory, viewability rates, and low levels of invalid traffic.



**70%**

of technically viewable ads  
are entirely ignored

The problem is that these legacy metrics don't correlate to business outcomes. [Previously published data](#) from Lumen shows that as much as 70% of technically viewable ads are entirely ignored. This is where programmatic losses, disguised as wins, start to affect campaign effectiveness and efficiency — the true price of ignorance.

But there is hope. The future will see a move from 'made for advertising' websites to 'made for attention' buying strategies.

In partnership with ExchangeWire, Lumen wanted to understand how advertisers are planning media around MFA websites, and how attention-focused buying strategies can militate against spend wasted on these domains. To that end, we conducted a survey of 100 media professionals across the US and UK in April 2024, and interviewed leading marketers, to detail the current state of the market.

In the MFA Report 2024: From Made for Advertising to Made for Attention, we will cover:

1. The MFA landscape in 2024
2. Media planning and current MFA strategies
3. How attention can eliminate MFA ad waste
4. Getting started with a Made for Attention strategy
5. The Made for Attention strategy: A case study

**“Buying MFA inventory incentivises advertising malpractice, encouraging publishers to rely on this source of revenue to remain competitive. MFAs are a threat to news media and other genuine content. Creators and buyers should take a strong stance against it to support the open web and the press.”**

— **Wilfried Carrie**

Global managing director, biddable media, Havas Media Network

# The MFA landscape in 2024

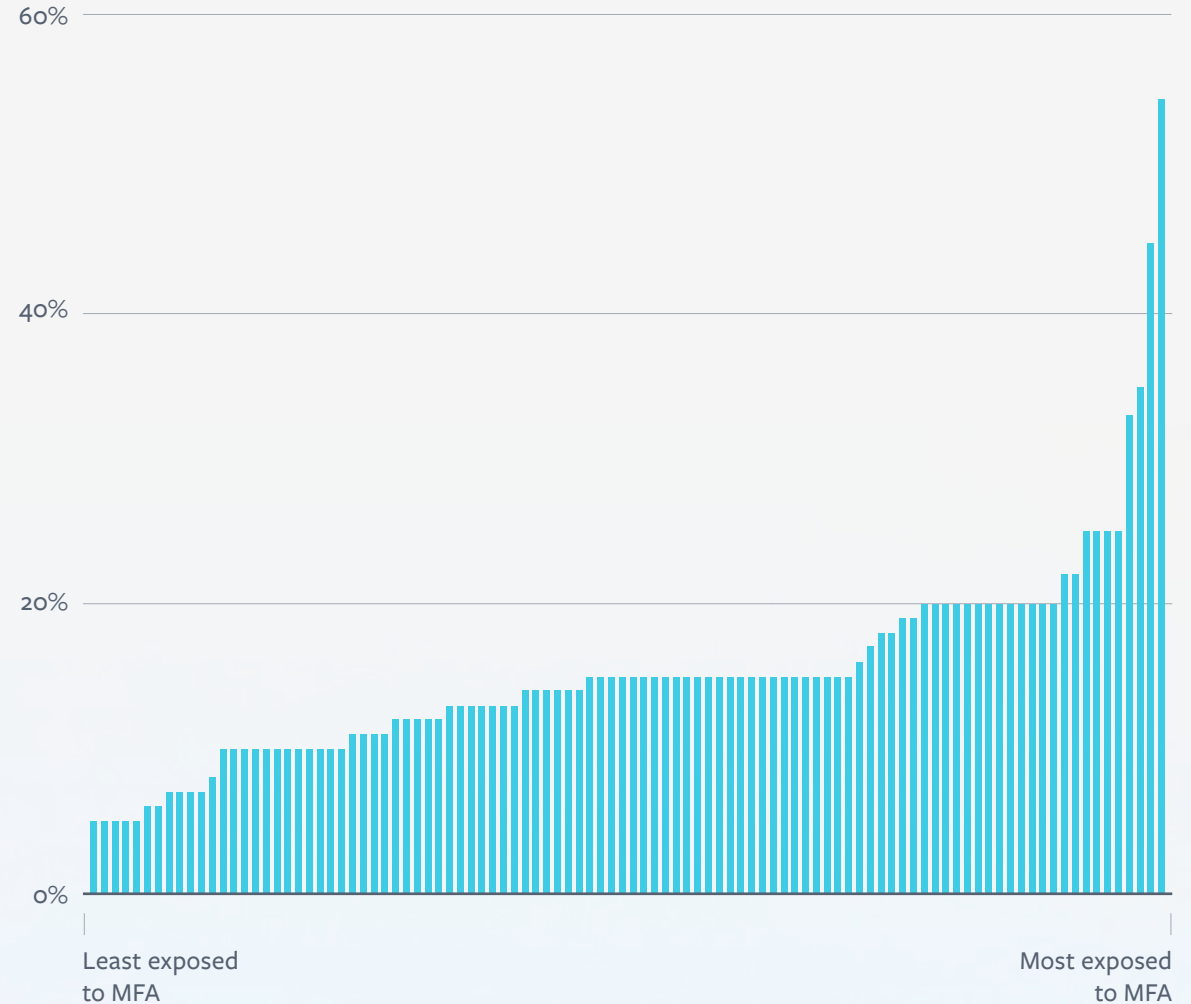
**To paraphrase the famous quote from Philadelphia retailer John Wanamaker, advertisers suspect that half their budget is wasted — they just don't know which half.**

It's clear that many digital advertisers are still spending money on the sites where ads are viewable but don't get seen. But that doesn't mean they can't see where that budget is going.

Our survey found that most advertisers had a way to see if ads were going to MFA websites, but transparency alone didn't stop ads from getting delivered to those domains. According to our findings, media buyers in the US and the UK are generally highly confident in the level of transparency they are receiving with their programmatic media investments, with an average confidence rating of 4.1 out of a maximum of 5. However, our cohort estimated as much as 55% of their ads were still going to MFA websites, with an average of 15.3%. Critically, all surveyed marketers reported that some of their ad spend was directed towards MFA sites.

Proportion of ads placed on made-for-advertising websites

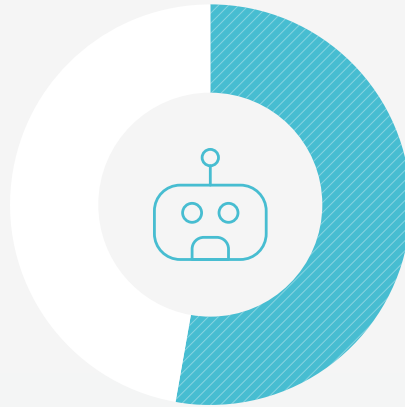
**Figure 1: Distribution of proportion of ads placed on MFA websites — UK/US 2024**



### When media professionals were asked about their top concerns about poor-quality domains:



55% cited sustainability due to excessively high ad loads



53% cited bot traffic



42% cited viewability issues



36% cited inefficient budget spend



20% cited low quality web content



20% cited low level of attention paid to MFA websites

Given the known issues associated with this lower-quality inventory, why are MFA websites still a significant part of the media mix?

55%

—  
estimated of our cohorts' ads still going to MFA websites

It comes down to the pressures to deliver technically viewable impressions at a low cost.

“MFA websites *appear* at a surface level to provide great value — impressions are typically ‘viewable’ and low cost – what’s not to like?” says Katie Hartley, managing director at dentsu. “In reality, *all* brands are really looking to achieve something beyond simply being delivered. Just because an ad is viewable, it doesn’t mean that it will be viewed. Our research with Lumen showed us that on some sites *most* digital display ads go entirely unseen.”

But there is a high price to pay for such low cost media. Ads that don’t drive attention can’t drive business outcomes. Consumers can’t remember something that they haven’t noticed — and they can’t buy from something they haven’t engaged with.

And for MFA sites, a focus on technical viewability standards might be making the problem worse. If advertisers reward publishers for delivering technically viewable inventory, then that is what they will provide. Hence the rise of websites with multiple viewable ads firing simultaneously, often in positions deliberately out of the eyeline of readers so as not to distract them from the content too much. Officially, all these ads *could* be seen, and seen by a living, breathing human being. It’s just very unlikely that they are, in fact, looked at.

Smart media planners are therefore looking to move beyond viewability metrics to buying ads based on better indicators of media quality. But what signals can help the most?



# Methods and metrics for combatting MFA

In the world of media buying, there are a host of different metrics and targeting methods used by advertisers to ensure media quality. However, our research showed that some tactics may actually increase exposure to made-for-advertising websites.

For example, the surveyed media buyers across the UK and US with a high proportion of ads placed on MFA domains valued reach, brand safety, and low CPM as their primary metrics. This indicates that if cost efficiency and deploying ads on the widest range of sites are the most important criteria for a campaign, ads are more likely to end up on MFA websites.

By contrast, the top three metrics for advertisers with the lowest proportion of ads delivered to MFA websites are clicks, incrementality, and attention. This is in line with many media strategies from cutting-edge agencies. Media buyers with high exposure to MFAs prioritise legacy impression-focused metrics, whereas those with low exposure focus on tangible effectiveness-based metrics.

“We have a stringent set of criteria that domains must meet in order to make it into our curated inventory supply, dentsu Marketplace — it ensures we don’t fall foul of domain spoofing or any other dubious tactics,” advises Katie Hartley from dentsu.

“We favour the use of inclusion lists over exclusions lists, and pair these criteria with robust supply chain strategies (SPO) and the constant monitoring of media quality through KPIs such as attention, engagement, sales, and on-site metrics such as bounce rate and dwell time,” says Wilfried Carrie, global managing director, biddable media, Havas Media Network. “Carbon emissions can also be a good proxy to identify and avoid inventory that is using multiple sellers and resellers to create a high level of ad calls on a single page.”

**Figure 2: Difference in discerned importance of advertising metric versus exposure to MFA sites**

Metric	Difference in discerned importance of advertising metric	
Clicks	0.49	More important to advertisers with <b>low</b> (<10% media spend) exposure to MFAs
Incrementality	0.31	
Attention	0.26	
CPA/Cost per conversion	0.26	
Brand lift	0.21	
Proportion of fraudulent/invalid traffic (IVT)	0.16	
Carbon footprint	0.12	
Sales / conversions	0.12	
Completion rates	0.03	
Return on ad spend (ROAS)	+0.00	
Viewability	+0.05	
CPM	+0.22	
Brand Safety	+0.26	
Awareness	+0.35	

**Figure 3: Methods used to reduce exposure to MFAs — advantages and disadvantages (summary)**

Method	Advantage	Disadvantage
PMPs	<b>+</b> Can be used to target high-quality domains	<b>-</b> Massive PMPs (>500 domains) can harbour similar levels of MFA and fraud to open web
Third-party verification partners	<b>+</b> Proven capabilities in reducing outright cases of fraud	<b>-</b> Potential conflicts of interest driven by loose definitions around media quality
Reliance on media buying partners	<b>+</b> Close collaboration with buy-side partners highly effective at increasing media quality	<b>-</b> None, but do not over-rely on partners, ensure conversations around media quality are frank and ongoing
In-house analysis of log-level data	<b>+</b> Effective method of identifying spend directed to sub-premium environments, but ensure appropriate filtering of log-level data beyond base metrics such as CPM or viewability	<b>-</b> Access to data can be an issue

## In-house analysis of log-level data

In a somewhat surprising finding, the majority (52%) of surveyed media buyers with a high proportion of ads placed on MFA sites stated that they perform in-house analysis of log-level data.

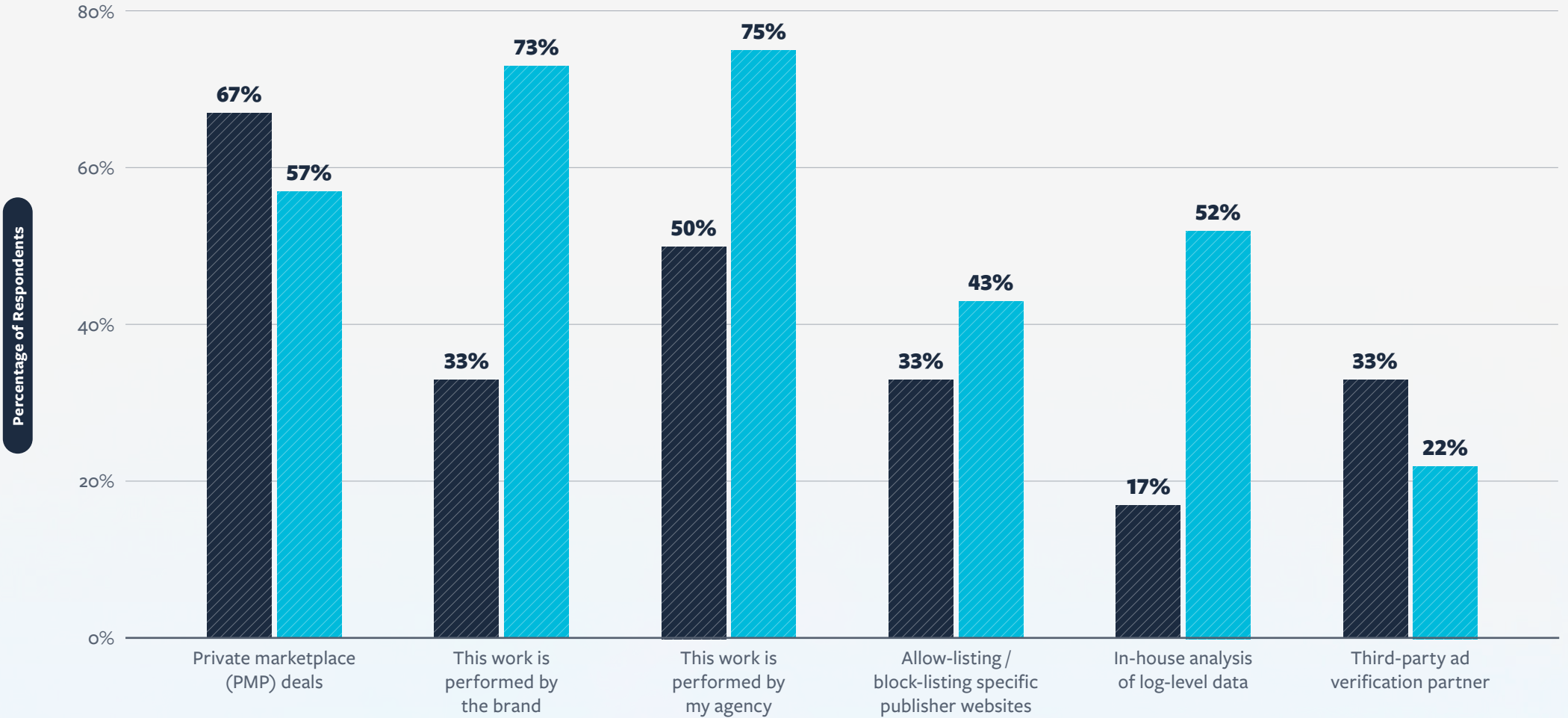
While careful analysis of log-level data is often highlighted as an effective method of identifying spend directed to sub-premium environments and prevent future ad dollars flowing there through block/inclusion lists, this finding highlights the need for media buyers to ensure appropriate filtering of log-level data beyond base metrics such as CPM or viewability.

**52%**

of surveyed media buyers with a high proportion of ads placed on MFA sites stated that they perform in-house analysis of log-level data

Figure 4: Method of ensuring ads are placed in environment visible to target audience versus group proportion of ads placed on MFA sites — UK/US 2024

● LOW (<10%) PROPORTION OF ADS PLACED ON MA SITES ● HIGH (>20%) PROPORTION OF ADS PLACED ON MFA SITES





73%

of agencies with high exposure to MFAs stated their brand partners are responsible for placing their ads in visible environments

## Buyer partners

Where media buyers are *overly* reliant on their agency or brand partners to ensure ads are placed in environments visible to the target audience, these are much more likely to have their ads placed on MFA sites.

Three-quarters of surveyed brands with a high (>20%) proportion of ads placed on MFA sites stated that their agency is responsible for ensuring that their ads are placed in environments visible to the target audience, while a near-identical proportion (73%) of agencies with high exposure to MFAs stated their brand partners are responsible for placing their ads in visible environments.

It is therefore recommended that brands and agencies closely consult with their respective partners to ensure that their efforts are not redundant, nor that incorrect assumptions are being made as to which party is managing ad placements according to environment quality. As evidenced in this survey, respondents who are most knowledgeable as to where their ads are being placed had the lowest proportion of their ad spend directed to MFAs. Those most knowledgeable as to the quality of their ad inventory (rating 5/5) on average placed just 11% of their inventory via MFA websites, versus 18% for respondents who rated themselves least knowledgeable (rating 3/5) as to where their ads were being placed.

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## Third-party verification providers

Third-party verification providers have been demonstrably effective in reducing the most nefarious cases of advertising fraud, publishing detailed technical studies on how they dismantle such criminal schemes on a regular basis.

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However, as a result of loose definitions around brand safety, MFAs, and, critically, media quality, these firms have been less effective at upholding media productivity. The extent of this was revealed in the December 2023 study published by the ANA, disclosing that loss of media productivity costs (including but not limited to MFA spend) account for 35 percent of the ad dollar.

Recent examples have further emphasised the issue. Though unintentional according to statements released by companies involved, third-party verification providers failed to halt, or even identify, activity by [Forbes](#) and [Gannett](#) which mimicked domain spoofing, a form of ad fraud. While MFA sites are generally not considered as being outright fraudulent, failure by parties widely accepted as experts to identify such activity highlights the difficulty in capturing MFA activity and filtering it out, if desired by the media buyer.

Further questions around potential conflicts of interest of third-party verification providers have also been asked in recent months. The majority of MFA traffic is known to be funnelled through paid channels, such as social media platforms and content recommendation engines. To use Facebook as an example, given [recent suggestions](#) that it is the primary source of MFA traffic, a host of third-party verification providers [work with the Meta-owned platform](#) on viewability and brand safety — metrics which as discussed MFA sites do not generally impeach despite being of low quality, and are thus waved through. The [recent appointment](#) of a verification company CEO to the board of a content distribution platform, who they are supposed to be monitoring, proves an uncomfortable reminder of this potential conflict.



## PMPs

Overall, private marketplace (PMP) deals are the most favoured method of ensuring that ads are delivered to websites where they are going to be seen by the target audience, with 64% of respondents reporting that they use PMPs.

However, while the perception of PMPs is that they offer a higher level of environment quality for ad placement, these can harbour similar levels of both IVT and MFA impressions as open marketplace bidding, particularly when the PMP consists of over 500 domains.

64%

of respondents reporting that they use PMPs

# How attention can eliminate MFA ad waste

**As detailed earlier in this report, media buyers that prioritise attention as a key metric for their advertising campaigns are significantly less exposed to MFA domains. So how does attention offer a way of navigating the mess of MFA? While clicks prioritise conversion and incrementality prioritise cost efficiency, attention serves as an important buying signal to ensure that your ads are getting seen with the right level of attention for each campaign, offering a new layer for media quality and performance.**

The specific set of attention metrics developed by Lumen determine how many people see an ad (% viewed) and how long they saw it. These metrics power the overall attention score, aCPM (attentive seconds per 1000 impressions) and the cost of attention (attentive cost per 1000 impressions) that allows advertisers to measure the price of an impression based on efficiency of attention, not viewability, the latter of which can be easily gamed by MFA site operators. According to [audited studies by PwC](#), optimising ad campaigns for attention instead of viewability drives higher performance for brands. Planning ad campaigns with attention metrics can help eliminate investment on ads that don't get seen and drive better outcomes across the funnel. This is why attention metrics have become an important new way to plan media for agencies and brands.

“At a baseline level, we use % viewed to measure the proportion of impressions that receive any eye gaze at all,” says Jon Waite, global managing director, mx development, Havas Media Network. “This allows us to identify inattentive impressions and reduce wastage. Beyond this, levels of attentive seconds (APM) tell us a lot about the quality of a placement in terms of its size, screen real estate, format, and ad clutter — acting as a proxy for the quality of the media experience the user is likely to have. We're also establishing attention thresholds to help clients understand minimum and maximum attention levels that are more likely to translate to brand and business results.”

Attention can act as a way to filter the ad inventory that isn't just likely to get the best inventory standards, but the best brand outcomes. This is why, with attention, media buyers can stop thinking about how to avoid made for advertising websites and start thinking about how to create made for attention media plans.

# The Made for Attention media plan

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**With an end-to-end attention technology suite that combines the largest eye-tracking dataset in the world with billions of attentive impressions, the Lumen Attention Model powers all of Lumen’s attention solutions and our made-for-advertising strategies.**

Through work in the field of attention measurement, optimisation, and activation since 2013, across agencies, brands, and platforms, Lumen has identified five ways advertisers can activate a made-for-attention media strategy that drives better outcomes through better ad inventory — eliminating wasted spend directed at MFA websites in the process:



# 1. Target websites with rich, readable content:

Data shows that the top 25% of domains drive 11x higher attention to display ads and 5x higher attention to video ads. This predominantly comes down to a better site layout and superior content. Websites with a rich content experience leads to deeper engagement, slower scrolling, and longer viewable time — all factors that drive higher attention scores to ads.

Figure 5: Attention per 000 Display Impressions  
Top 250 domains

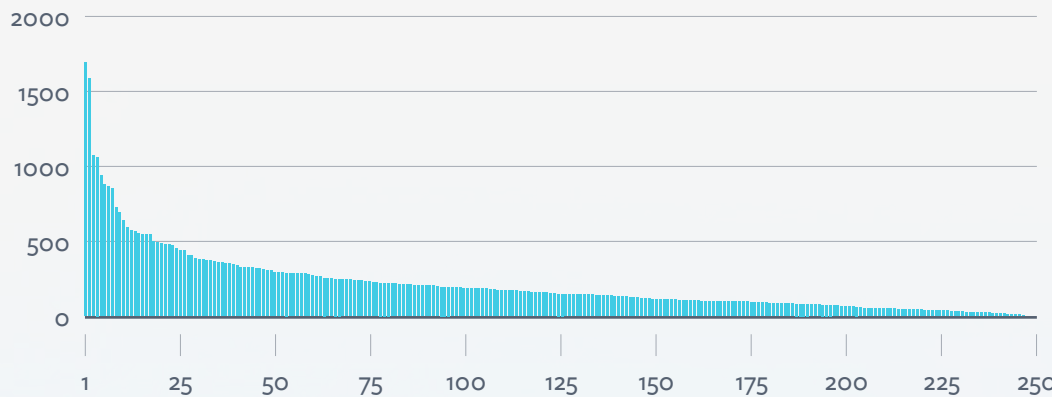
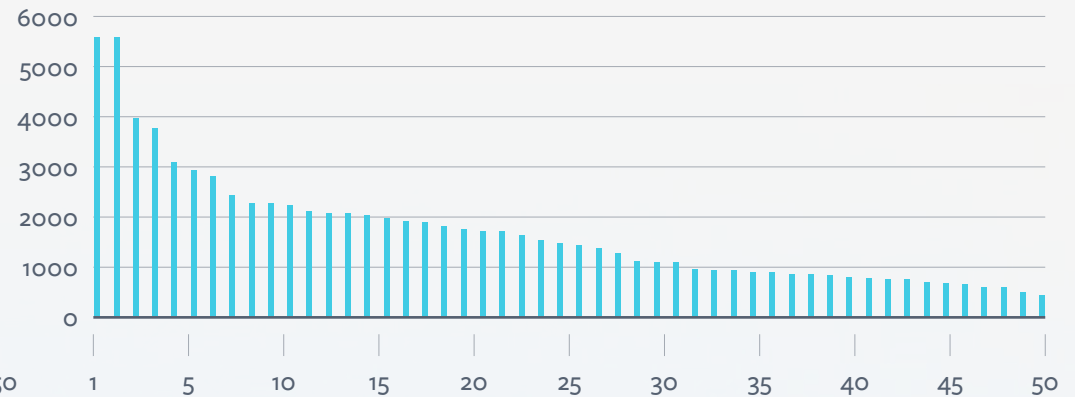


Figure 6: Attention per 000 Video Impressions  
Top 50 Domains



Quartile	Range	Mean average
Top 25%	271 – 1714	500
2 <sup>nd</sup> 25%	153 – 266	204
3 <sup>rd</sup> 25%	87 – 151	115
Bottom 25%	8 – 86	47

11x

Quartile	Range	Mean average
Top 25%	2099 – 5581	3241
2 <sup>nd</sup> 25%	1468 – 2064	1802
3 <sup>rd</sup> 25%	847 – 1419	1055
Bottom 25%	421 – 840	673

5x

Source: Lumen Passive Panels

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## 2. Plan media around high interest site categories:

Based on attentive seconds, news; fitness; home & garden; books & literature; and arts & garden websites are the highest-ranking categories for attention scores. The lowest-scoring categories include education, shopping, and business & industry.

When considering site lists and PMPs that target specific categories, attention can help when it comes to determining the right media mix for the right site groups. Articles get 1.6× higher attention scores than homepages, too, which means thinking about how you can reach the right level of attention with the right context per placement.

Figure 7: Display

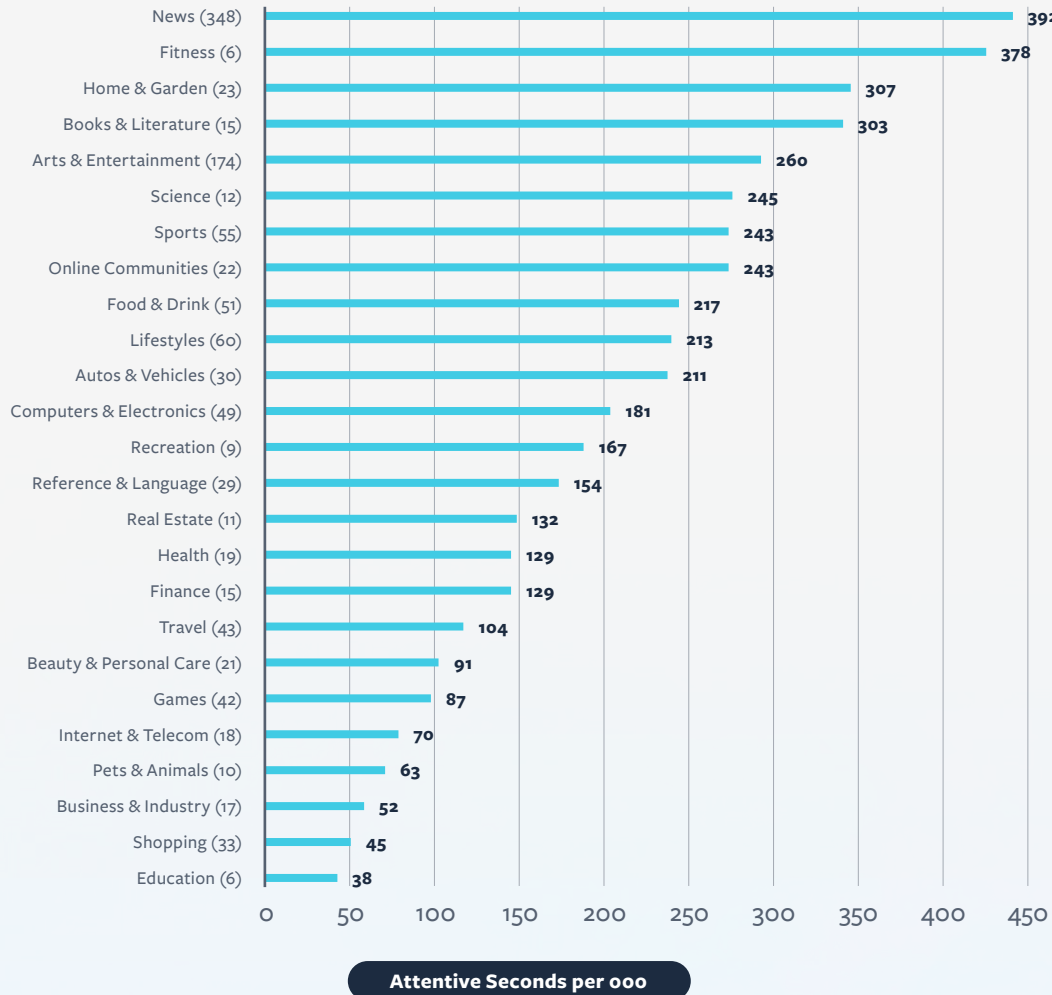
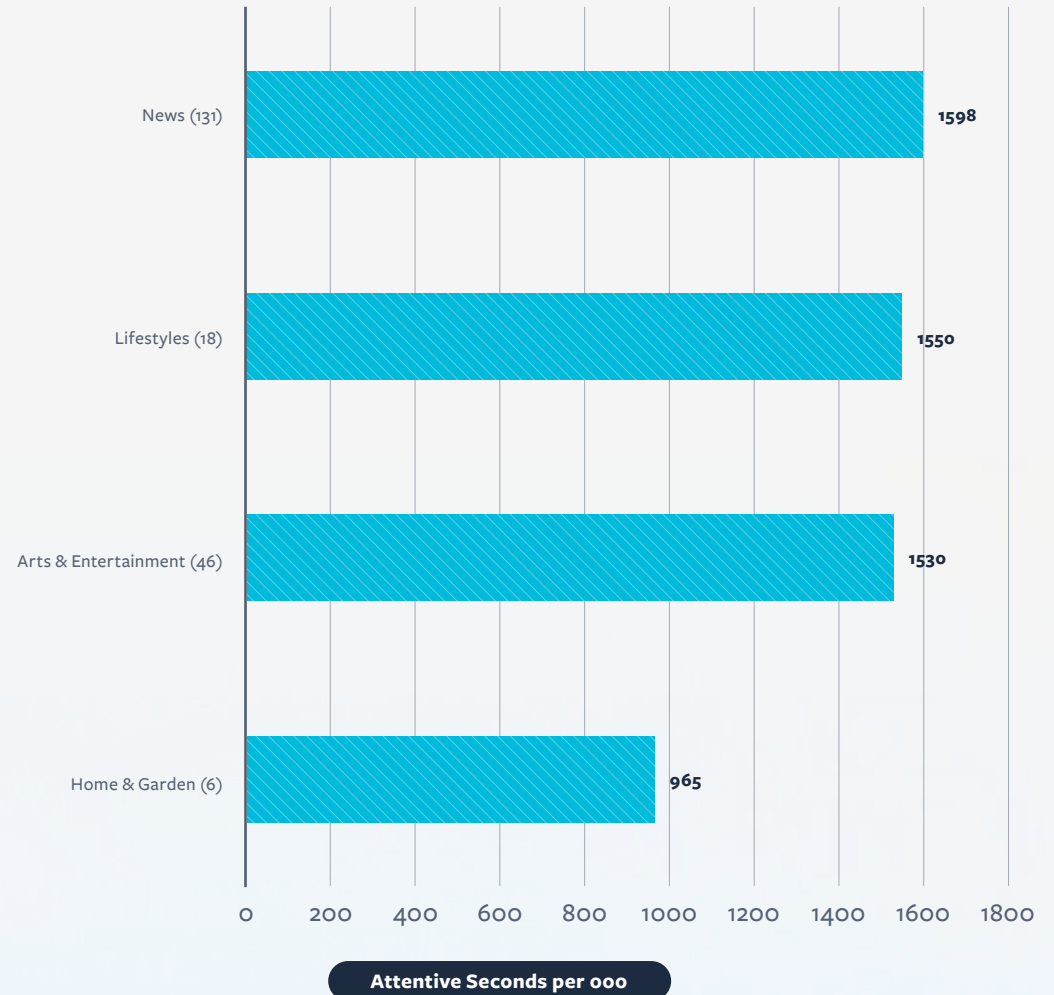


Figure 8: Video



Source: Lumen Passive Panels



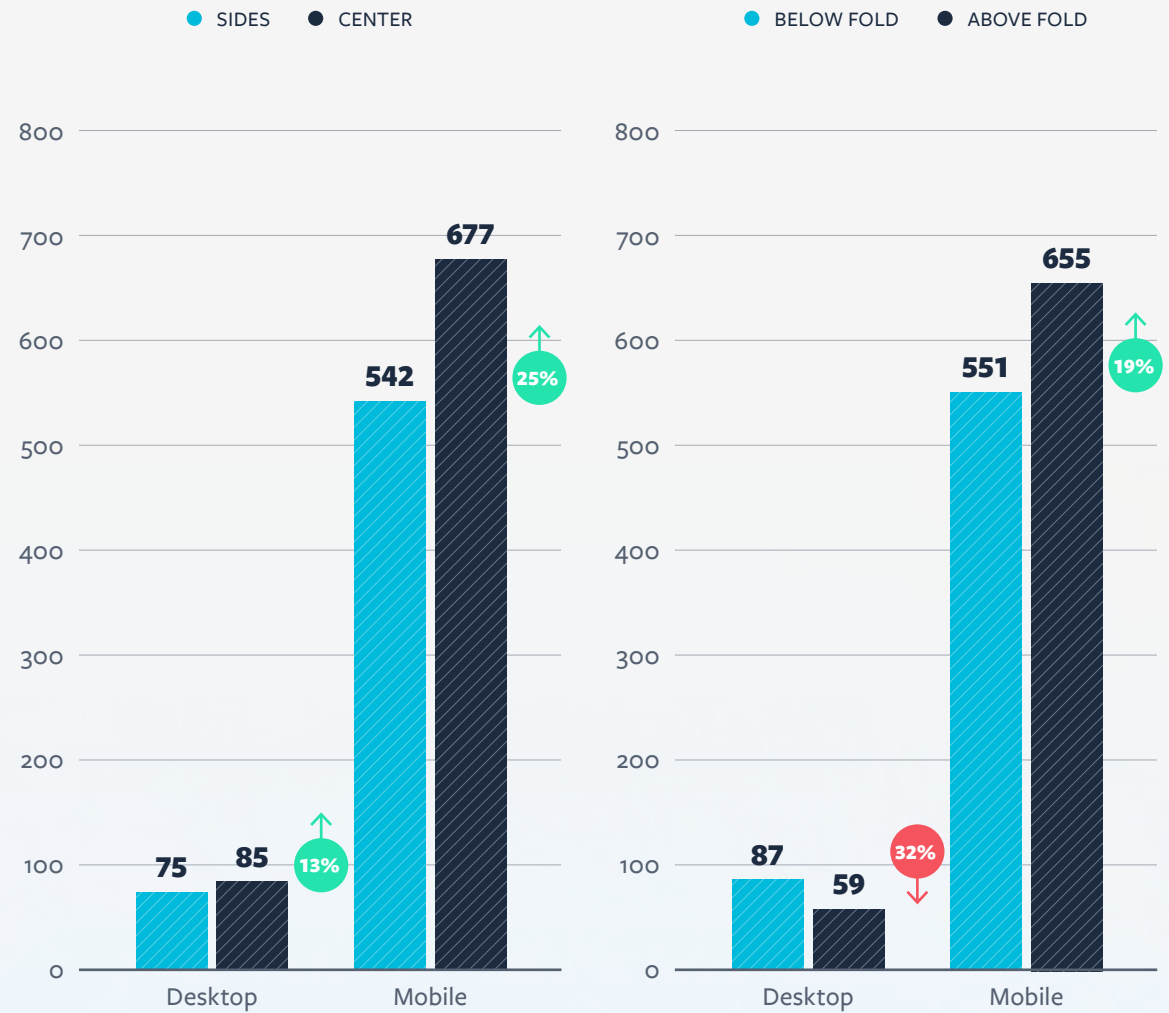
### 3. Consider position, ad size, and ad clutter:

The layout of both the ad and the domain are just as important as the content and context. Ads at the centre of the screen receive 20% higher attention than other ads. And the more ads on a screen, the less attention: when websites have 3+ ads on the screen at a time, attention drops by 50% on desktop and drops by 500% on mobile.

A media plan focused on buying bigger ad sizes drives higher attention and, consequently, better outcomes.

Ad Attention — Attentive seconds per 1000

Figure 9: Ads in the centre of the screen receive c.20% more attention



Source: Lumen Passive Panels

## 4. Look for made-for-attention partners.

There's been a lot of technology dedicated to transforming display and video ads into engaging experiences. By partnering with premium ad-tech partners that build solutions that are made-for-attention, Lumen has found that rich media ads get higher attention scores that translate to real results.

### WeTransfer

Generates 150x higher attention than desktop display ads.

### SEEDTAG

Drives 3.3x higher attention than IAB formats and 37% higher attention compared to social media.

### Teads

A high attention format already, ad creative optimised with Teads Atelier drives a further 49% increase in attention

### azerion

High impact formats gain attention — and amplify the attention of subsequent standard format ads by 43%, leading to a 20% reduction in cost-per-action.

### anzu

In-game ads drive 98% viewability with 3.1 seconds average view time with 49% ad recall.

### BIDSTACK

In-game ads get 2x higher attention than digital norms.

### Digital Turbine

In-game ads are viewed for 22 seconds on average — significantly more than a typical 30 second TV ad.



Snapchat: Augmented reality formats drive 20x higher ad recall lift

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## 5. Combine Made for Attention media with business results:

**No one advertises for attention's sake. It's a means to an end — the end usually being increased salience or increased sales. To fully understand the impact of attention, marketers should combine attention metrics with outcomes metrics to understand how reducing spend on MFA improves business performance.**

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Success looks different for different advertisers. Some campaigns will want to drive performance metrics, others brand awareness, others sales in store. As a result, advertisers will work with a variety of third-party data providers, from brand lift study providers to sales data specialists to understand the true impact of their activity. Whatever your objective, it's important to link your attention data to your outcomes data to understand what is driving success.

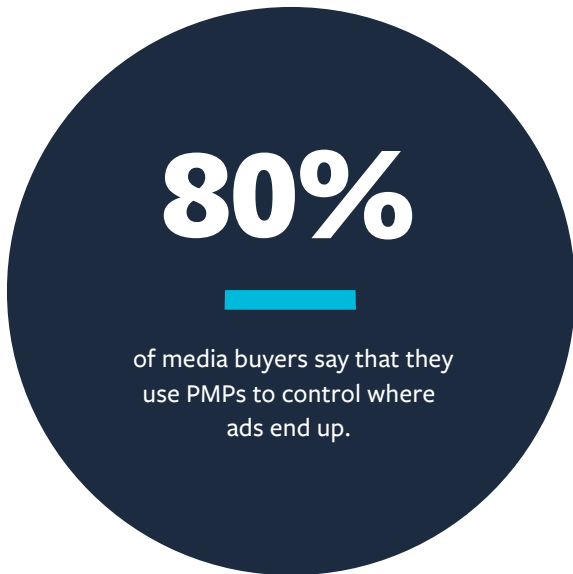
By running an A/B test with both attention metrics and outcomes data, advertisers can see exactly how made-for-attention strategies drive better results across awareness, consideration, and conversion goals.

Analysis of these sorts of live experiments reveals that different campaigns require different levels of attention to be successful. Ads intended to communicate a complex brand message might need more attention time than ads designed simply to raise awareness. Understanding the right level of attention to deliver the right results for your brand is essential in driving sustainable improvements in business results over the long term.


It's an approach pioneered by dentsu around the world. "dentsu Effective Attention, powered by Lumen, is supporting us in the identification and selection of the most valuable inventory," says Katie Hartley. "It serves as a unification metric for us across different connected channels and platforms, reading the associated ad and environmental characteristics of the exposure in order to report on the volume and relative value of the attention paid. We've found this new metric, across both our Attention Economy research and in real world campaigns, to be a much more reliable proxy for outcomes than viewability alone."

# The Made for Attention strategy in action

If attention offers a new way to drive better performance across ad campaigns — and potentially save ad budget from MFA waste at the same time — what do those results look like?



Attention data can be used in three ways here:

 <p><b>Planning tools:</b> highlighting which inventory is most likely to be ‘made for attention’ rather than ‘made for advertising’ before you buy</p>	 <p><b>Post-bid measurement tools:</b> tagging campaigns to estimate attention for each impression served</p>	 <p><b>Pre-bid optimisation tools:</b> the creation of private marketplaces (PMPs) or custom algorithms within DSPs to ensure that you only buy ‘made for attention’ inventory</p>
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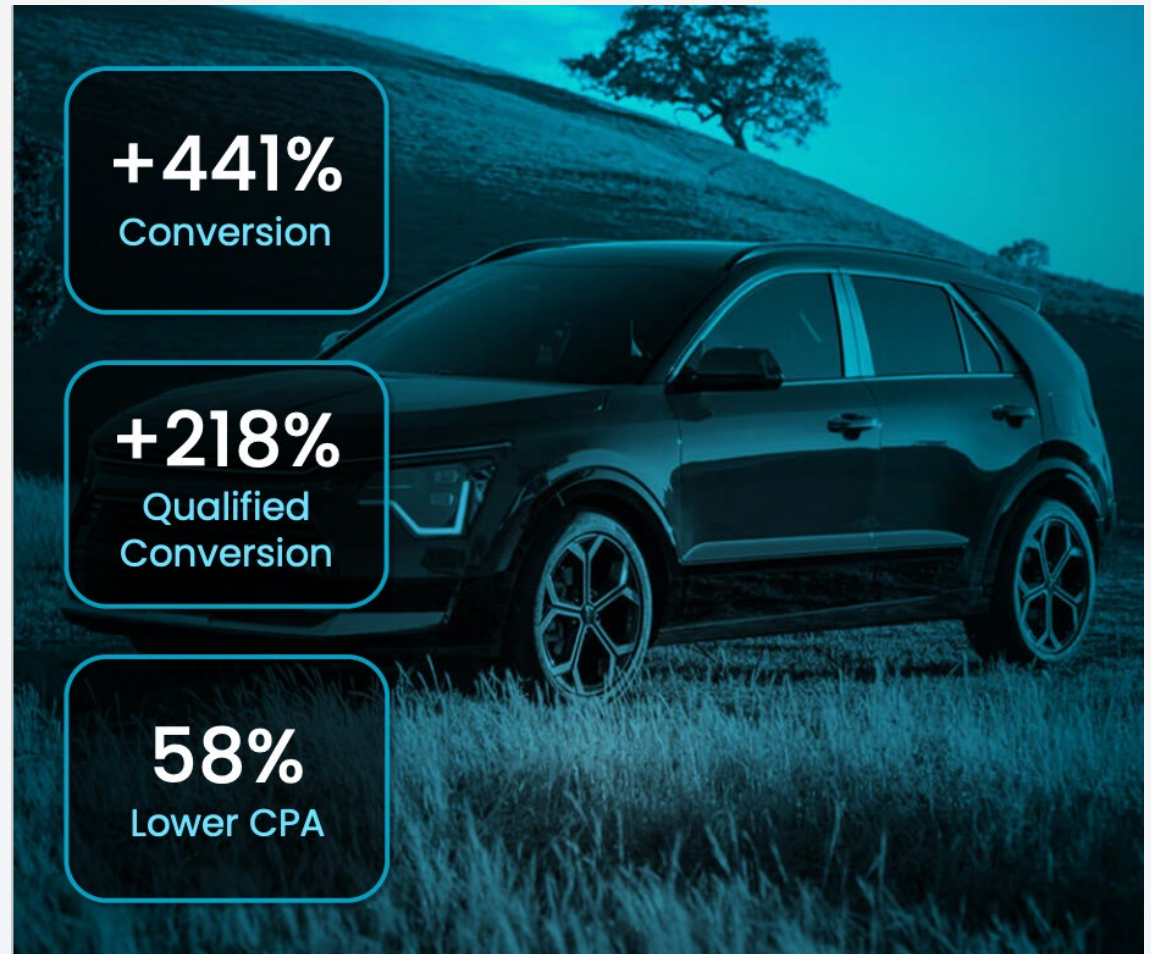
“Attention data integration into our central global planning tools allows us to plan and optimise reach, frequency, and attention across media channels. Measurement of client campaigns with LAMP allows us to improve with each successive campaign by removing inattentive inventory and identifying inventory of a suitable level of attention to drive the desired brand outcomes. We’ve also been extensively testing the use of custom bidding algorithms inside DSPs using Lumen data to optimise towards placements that are more likely to cost-effectively deliver desired attention levels.” states Jon Waite, global managing director, mx development, Havas Media Network.

**Of the three, pre-bid optimisation is the simplest way to drive business results, fast.**

“We use our proprietary model powered by Lumen for manual or automated optimisation through dynamic PMPs or custom algorithms,” explains Hartley. “There are also a number of ways for us to further bespoke and refine those models for individual clients, using eye-tracking studies, performance, sales or brand lift data”.

According to surveyed media professionals, in the US, 80% media buyers say that they use PMPs to control where ads end up. With Lumen’s latest attention targeting solution, the Lumen Loop, attention, high-quality websites, and curation capabilities are combined to create a custom ad inventory filter that drives the right level of attention to get the best possible results.

When a major international car brand deployed the Lumen Loop to deliver ads to a curated, attentive private marketplace (aPMP), the brand drove +441% higher overall conversion rate with 58% lower cost per action when compared to the control campaign. Not only that, the qualified visit conversion rate was +218% higher and the cost per qualified visit was 9% lower.



Every made-for-attention media plan is based on a simple tactic: getting ads delivered to where they’re most likely to get the attention that turns into action and outcomes. As far a cry as can be from the spray and pray of made for advertising.

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## Acknowledgements

ExchangeWire and Lumen would like to take this opportunity to thank the surveyed media industry professionals, alongside our thought leaders who contributed to the research, for their time and insight which proved invaluable. Namely:

- **Wilfried Carrie**, global managing director, biddable media, Havas Media Network
- **Katie Hartley**, managing director, product & innovation, Dentsu Data Labs
- **Jon Waite**, global managing director, mx development, Havas Media Network

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## LUMEN

### ABOUT LUMEN

Lumen, the global attention technology company, has been helping advertisers turn attention into action and outcomes since 2013. With a patented eye-tracking platform and best-in-class programmatic advertising solutions powered by the largest eye-tracking dataset in the world and billions of attentive impressions, Lumen's award-winning technology is changing how advertisers plan and buy media from start to finish.



### ABOUT EXCHANGEWIRE

ExchangeWire provides news and analysis on the business of media, marketing and commerce with a specific focus on data and technology.

We offer actionable market intelligence on the trends and innovations that are shaping the media, marketing and commerce industries.

We're always interested in any technology and business-related news globally, and in particular across EMEA and APAC. Relevant companies are encouraged to get in touch. We're also interested in hearing from PR people working with companies in any of the areas named above.

For more information, please visit [www.exchangewire.com](http://www.exchangewire.com)

### SAMPLE & METHODOLOGY

Original data within this report is derived from a survey of 100 media professionals working within a brand or advertising agency within the UK (n=50) or the US (n=50). Data was collected from 4<sup>th</sup> April 2024 to 8<sup>th</sup> April 2024.