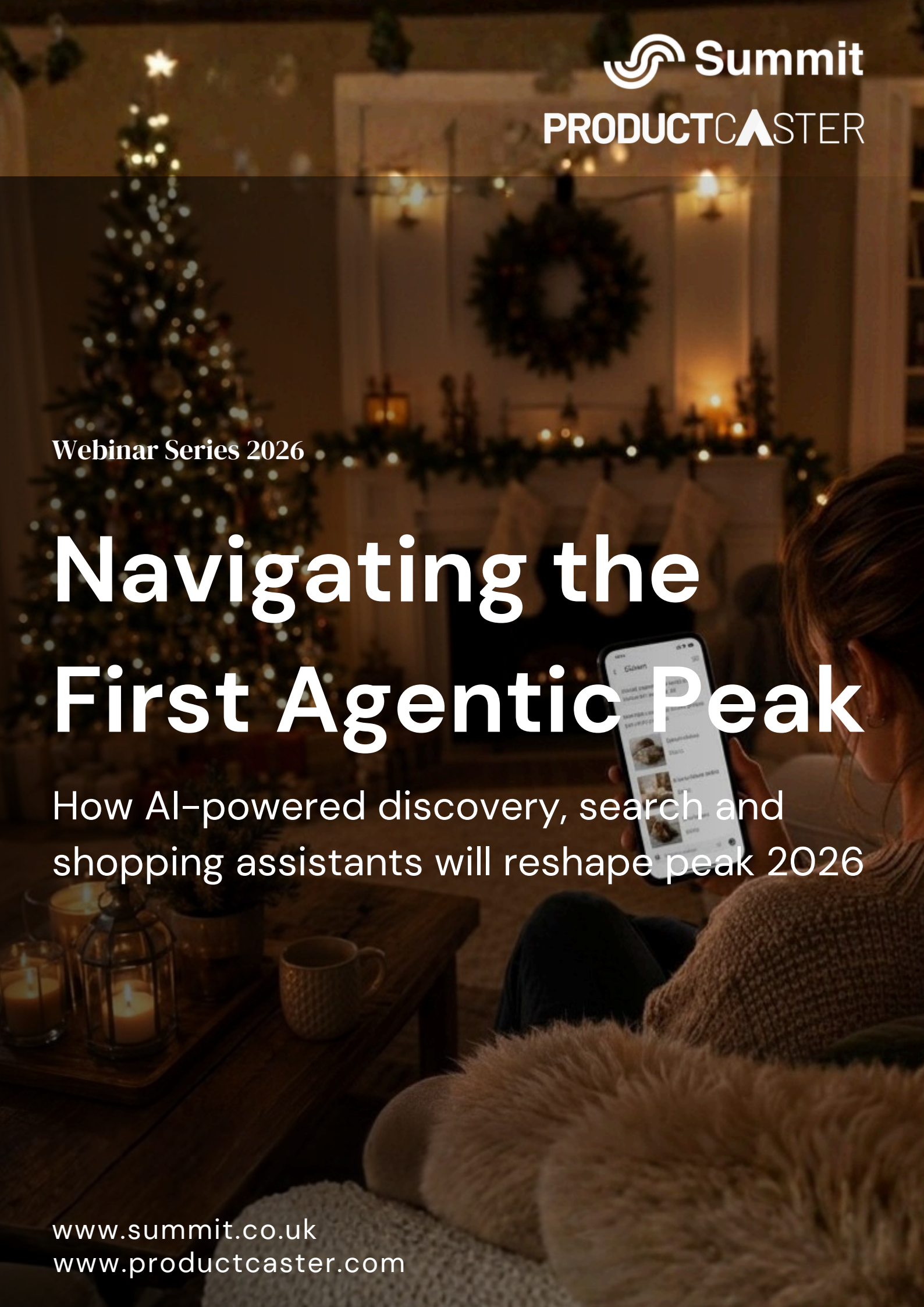

Summit

PRODUCTCASTER

Webinar Series 2026

Navigating the First Agentic Peak

How AI-powered discovery, search and shopping assistants will reshape peak 2026

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If you would like to optimise your product data, reach out to us at **info@productcaster.com!**

1 Introduction

How Smart Retailers Will Win the AI Shopping Revolution This Peak

The 2026 holiday shopping season marks the transition from traditional search and browse e-commerce to Agentic Discovery. This peak is unlike any before as AI agents are reshaping how consumers discover, evaluate, and buy, therefore the retailers who prepare their data, campaigns, and teams now will dominate this golden quarter.

While this is not the first peak, it is the most important one to get right as search is evolving and more shoppers turn to AI assistants to help guide them through their online journeys.

The retail landscape has reached a structural inflection point with the transition from search engine keyword queries to agentic AI conversational discovery. Though AI shopping is yet to replace Google search, it is important to note that the journey is starting somewhere new, and whoever owns that first conversation wins as this will fast become the new normal.

This whitepaper is based on our webinar series:
Navigating the First Agentic Peak
How AI-Powered Discovery, Search and Shopping Assistants Will Reshape Peak 2026

You can find each webinar recording here:

- Agentic Peak Strategy: What to do Differently this Peak
- Affiliates in the Era of AI Discoverability
- Peak Preparation: Your Final Readiness Checklist

2 | Agentic Peak Strategy

What to do Differently this Peak

Based on our webinar with Chris Becker, Senior Paid Media Manager at THG/Lookfantastic, Jill Anderson, Director at Productcaster, and Abbie Law, Senior Paid Media Manager at Summit

Executive Summary

E-commerce is undergoing its most significant structural shift in two decades. The 2026 peak marks the emergence of the first '**Agentic Peak**', where AI assistants transition from passive search assistants to active commercial intermediaries.

The Shift into Agentic Peak

1998
Launch of Amazon, first online shopping peak

2001
Market Shift, 5.5m adults made online purchases leading up to Christmas

2005
First True Online Peak , pre-Christmas spending at hundreds of million per week

2010
First Black Friday in the UK, introduced by Amazon

2014
Permanent Shift in e-Commerce with the end of Boxing Day Dominance

2016
First Mobile Peak - consumers spend more on mobile than desktops

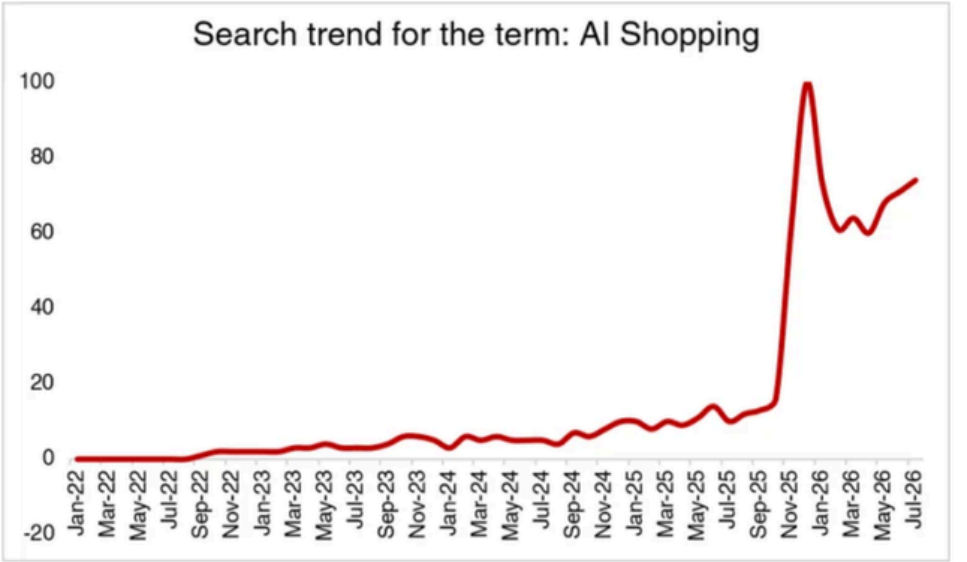
2018
First Next-Day / Same-Day Delivery Peak

2024
First 'Triple Peak' - Black November replaces the single day peak

2026
First Agentic Peak?

What this Data is Telling Us

Boxing Day 2025 saw the sharpest AI shopping term spike ever recorded, not because people were buying gifts, but because they were discovering products, finding bargains, and exploring new brands through conversational search. This is the new discovery engine.



Also, looking at the trend data above, last year, we started to see interest in AI shopping rise towards the end of Q3, with activity peaking at the end of the year, and December seeing triple digit growth. Crucially, we can also see that interest has remained high up to the present day, being considerably higher than it was in July, only a year ago.

Cautious Optimism Heading into Peak

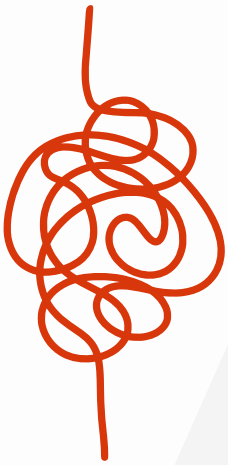
Positive Signals	Watch-outs
The 'Burnham Bounce' is driving renewed consumer confidence	Middle East tensions remain an ongoing wildcard
World Cup boost lifting household sentiment	Cost of living is still influencing spending decisions
Strong summer improving discrentionary spending mood	Autumn budget is a key unknown heading into Q4
Inflation easing, households' economic view strongest since 2024	Sustained optimism depends on the government delivering on economic promises

Operational Paradigm Shift

Browsing is becoming more conversational and AI is getting better at surfacing the most relevant results tailored to a user's specific request and doing it faster than any search engine ever could. The Large Language Model (LLM) is being trained on massive amounts of textual data to understand, process and generate human language in a conversational context. It is fundamentally reshaping how audiences search, discover, and buy.

Old Way	New Way
Type keywords into Google	Have a conversation with an AI assistant
Browse multiple pages	Get curated, personalised recommendations
Compare products manually	AI compares and shortlists for you
Click through to retailer	Complete purchase within the AI experience

What is Changing this Peak?



- *Browsing is Conversational* - shoppers don't type keywords; they talk to AI to discover products.
- *The Messy Middle is Shrinking* - AI compresses the journey from exploration to purchase.
- *Agentic checkout is Live in the US* - buy without ever leaving Gemini (UK/Europe to follow).
- UCP (Universal Commerce Protocol) is rolling out a standardised language between AI agents and retailers.
- *Gemini Uses Google Shopping Graph* - pulling real-time data from billions of products.

The AI Consumer Profile & Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP)

Demographics & Behavioural Profile

- 48% of 25–34-year-olds exhibit positive AI shopping sentiment vs. 31% of those over 51.
- Younger cohorts with rising disposable income make AI-first shopping their default behaviour.
- Discovery Peak: AI shopping volume spikes post-Black Friday (Boxing Day / New Year), proving AI is driven by product discovery and self-gifting rather than simple gift purchasing.

Peak Readiness Checklist: Discovery & Protocol

- Structure and audit product data for complete cross-surface visibility.
- Integrate UCP infrastructure into dev sprints ahead of native commerce rollout.
- Supply high-resolution imagery and verified customer reviews.
- Clear trust signals: transparent returns policies, verified ratings, explicit shipping lead times.
- Leverage first-party data to target the AI-native 18–34 demographic.

Feed Optimisation is Key this Peak

Without a complete, optimised feed, you are invisible to the algorithms driving agentic shopping. This is because AI agents and algorithms need data to understand, categorise, and recommend your products. So, no more keyword stuffing as this is now about quality, structure, and richness.

Titles & Descriptions	Optimised content used by LLMs to compare product specs against competitor inventories.
Product Reviews & Highlights	Builds immediate trust signals and highlights distinct USPs.
Pricing, Shipping & Returns	Complete offer attributes parsed by AI agents during price comparison queries.

Clean Product Images	Studio shots for matching accuracy combined with lifestyle imagery for contextual discovery.
GTINs	The fundamental identifier required for Google to match products across global surfaces.
Product Types	Granular categorisation tree required for precise agentic indexing.

Advanced Feed: Competitive Advantage

Most competitors leave optional feed fields blank. Populating these fields provides immediate organic and paid visibility advantages in AI environments. There is no such thing as too much data when it comes to AI readiness.

- *Q&As* - Answers the conversational queries shoppers ask the AI
- *Documentation* - Provides technical specifications for deep agent matching.
- *Related Products* - Powers automated cross-selling and recommendation loops within AI responses.

Demographics & Behavioural Profile

- Publish feeds frequently, especially with high stock volatility.
- Exclude low-stock or near-sold-out SKUs; focus budget on products with more opportunity.
- ProductMaximiser tool can be used to identify gaps and maximise the full product list.

AI Campaign Control

Block Brand Traffic

PMax and AI Max default to your easiest wins (your own brand terms). Stop it before it cannibalises your conversions.

Use URL Exclusions & Text Guidelines

Focus AI on incremental, new customer conversions.

Automate Search Query Reports via Scripts
Always keep a human review layer. Don't let it run unchecked.

Allow 2-Weeks Learning Phase
Measure performance in weeks 3–6

Key Principle
Work with AI, not against it, but never hand over the wheel entirely. Human expertise is still the differentiator.

Audience & First-Party Data

- First-Party Data Usage: Polls reveal 59% of marketers use first-party data "a little, but not strategically," while 18% do not use it at all.
- The First-Party Imperative - With cookie deprecation underway, feeding clean first-party data into PMAX as audience signals is critical for training algorithms on high-value customer profiles.
- Demographic Tailoring - Segment asset groups by age cohort using identical SKUs but distinct messaging.

Measurement & Organisational Readiness

Without clear impact measurement, you cannot secure senior leadership buy-in. Here is your 3-Pillar Agentic Peak Readiness Framework:

Discoverability

Can AI agents find, understand and represent you?

- Can agents read and interpret your pages?
- Is your product feed complete and high quality?
- Does your content answer shopper questions?
- Do you have strong review coverage?
- Are shipping and returns clear?

Measurement

How will you measure impact when visibility is limited?

- Add referral tracking to dashboards.
- Use SKU A/B tests to measure the impact of product attributes.
- Reverse controls after 4–6 weeks to validate KPI changes.
- Track the share of traffic from LLMs, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot.
- Plan for UCP measurement where no on-site session occurs.

Organisational Readiness

Is your team set up to act on the opportunity?

- Align PPC and SEO teams.
- Keep feed and website data accurate and consistent.
- Build reporting that keeps partners and senior leaders informed.
- Integrate AI attributes directly at source level where possible.
- Agree budgets with clear expectations about measurement limitations.

Are You Ready for this Agentic Peak?

Key Takeaways

Feed-First	Treat your product data as your #1 marketing asset.
Data-Rich	Populating optional attributes competitors ignore.
Demographically Smart	Tailoring messaging to the AI-native 18–34 cohort.
In Control	Using AI campaign types with guardrails, not blind trust.
Measurement-Ready	Building directional frameworks even where attribution is imperfect.

2 | Affiliates in the Era of AI Discoverability

Based on our webinar with David Lloyd, Chief Customer Officer at AWIN, Immy Hussain, Head of Affiliates at Summit, and Carl Hutchinson, Performance & Strategy Director at Summit.

Executive Summary

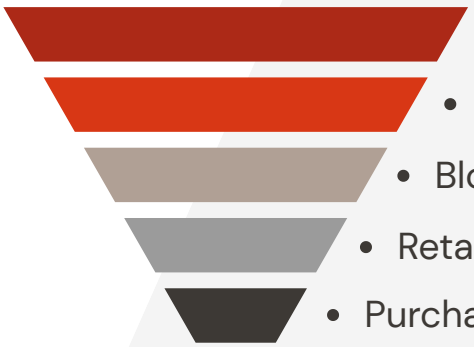
Affiliate marketing remains a foundational pillar of e-commerce due to its pay-for-performance commercial model. However, the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence search assistants, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, has fundamentally altered consumer discovery.

Where consumers previously navigated traditional search engine result pages (SERPs) across multiple web pages, modern journeys increasingly end in zero-click answers directly within conversational interfaces. AI agents now answer product queries directly, synthesise recommendations from top third-party sources, and facilitate compressed paths to purchase.

This section analyses the structural shift toward AI Discoverability, explores the technical breakdown of how AI agents surface affiliate publishers, highlights tracking and attribution risks, and presents actionable solutions for maintaining channel growth in 2026.

Traditional vs AI-Driven Conversion Journey

Traditional Journey



- Search Query
- SERP Links
- Blog / Review
- Retalier
- Purchase

AI Agent Journey



- Conversational Promt
- AI Synthesized Answer + Citiations
- Direct Checkout

The Macro State of the Affiliate Channel

Revenue Resilience & Industry Growth

Despite broader disruptions across digital marketing, the affiliate channel has demonstrated remarkable growth:



- **£20.7 Billion Channel Valuation:** Data from the APMAs confirms consistent year-over-year expansion, validating the channel's commercial viability.
- **Low-Risk Commercial Model:** Brands continue to favour the performance framework where partners are compensated on verified sales outcomes rather than raw reach or impressions.

The AI Discovery Shift & Zero-Click Revenue

The transition from legacy search engines to Large Language Models (LLMs) has permanently shifted consumer traffic dynamics:



- **The Death of the "Ten Blue Links":** Search queries no longer default to ranked web links. Instead, LLMs parse publisher content in real time and generate complete summary answers.
- **Zero-Click Searches:** Traditional affiliate blogs that previously dominated organic SERP rankings have seen a reduction in direct web referral traffic, as answers are consumed entirely within the AI interface.

Behavioural Metrics: Compressed Shopping Funnels

Data from Similarweb illustrates how AI shopping assistants alter user behaviour:



- **Page View Compression:** AI buyers complete transactions in only 1 to 2 page views, compared to 3 to 5 page views in traditional shopping funnels.
- **Reduced Time-to-Checkout:** High-intent AI referral sessions average under 90 seconds to reach partner affiliate checkouts, cutting historic funnel drop-off rates by 50%.

How AI Agents Utilises Affiliate Publishers

A common misconception is that generative AI removes the need for human-created affiliate content. In reality, LLMs rely heavily on high-quality third-party reviews and unbiased evaluations to formulate recommendations.

How LLMs Generate AI Recommendations

Query Parsing	Analyses user intent & constraints
Data Retrieval	Scrapes trusted review sites & affiliate blogs
Synthesis & Citation	Generates unbiased options & cites sources
Conversion Routing	Passes user to final transaction point

The Value of Third-Party Authority

- **Unbiased Synthesis:** LLM algorithms prioritise editorial integrity, comparing benefits, drawbacks, and real-world testing from independent sources over brand-owned marketing pages.
- **Publisher Reliance:** Content review sites, specialist blogs, and comparison engines directly inform AI output. Consequently, top-performing affiliates remain the primary engine powering AI recommendations.

Partner Category	Impact of AI Search	Future Strategy & Adaptation
Editorial & Content Blogs	Direct referral clicks are down due to zero-click AI summaries	Focus on driving LLM citations. High citation rates ensure brand inclusion in generated recommendations
Cashback & Loyalty	Highly resilient due to high direct user intent and closed-loop, logged-in ecosystems	Partner with AI platforms to offer real-time cashback incentives directly inside purchase assistants
Voucher & Coupon Partners	Evolving beyond generic codes toward targeted, high-yield conversion triggers	Dynamic code placement aligned with automated deal discovery inside AI shopping agents

The Measurement & Attribution Challenge

The transition to AI discoverability creates significant tracking vulnerabilities for brands using outdated attribution frameworks.

The Invisible Value Attribution Gap

Traditional Tracking (Last-Click / Standard Referral Links)

Publisher Review

↓

Direct Click

↓

Sales Conversion

Status: Tracked & Rewarded

Modern AI Traffic (Zero-Click Influenced)

Publisher Content

↓

Scraped by LLM

↓

AI Conversational Answer

↓

Direct Transaction (No Link Clicked)

Status: Untracked / Invisible Value

The Risk of Invisible Value

Traditional affiliate tracking relies on cookies, URL parameters, and last-click models. When an AI assistant uses a publisher's review to recommend a product without triggering a direct web link click, traditional attribution systems record zero value for that partner.

Strategic Risks of Misattributed Revenue



1. **Partner Demotivation:** Under-reporting publisher influence leads to unrewarded contributions, damaging relationships with key media partners.
2. **Reduced Brand Visibility:** If affiliates are not properly compensated for AI-driven influence, they may stop covering the brand's products, leading to a drop in LLM citation rates and brand visibility.
3. **Misallocated Marketing Budgets:** Capital may be shifted away from high-performing content partners due to incomplete data.

Operational Framework: Optimising for AI Discovery

To navigate the evolving affiliate ecosystem, digital marketing leaders must implement modern tracking frameworks, active citation monitoring, and updated partner compensation strategies.

AI Discoverability Roadmap for Brands

1. Monitor LLM Citations

Identify top-performing AI-cited publishers using tools like Searchable.

2. Update Attribution Models

Expand past single-click metrics to capture multi-touch AI journeys.

3. Restructure Partner Commissions

Offer hybrid reward structures combining tenancy fees, impression bonuses, and CPA.

4. Re-engage Core Publishers

Ensure top-cited content sites maintain up-to-date product specs and pricing feeds.

Leveraging Real-Time AI Tracking (Searchable)

Brands must adopt tools designed for generative search monitoring, such as Searchable, to manage LLM referral ecosystems:



- **Citation Auditing**: Track real-time brand citations across major LLMs (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude).
- **Competitor Intelligence:** Identify creator and publisher sites driving high recommendation volumes for competitor products.
- **Budget Allocation:** Redirect affiliate spend toward high-citation partners that directly improve AI search presence.

Evolving Compensation Models

To protect relationships with influential publishers in a zero-click environment, brands should adopt flexible payout models:

- **Hybrid CPA + Tenancy:** Combine base content placement rewards with performance-based bonuses to guarantee publisher revenue regardless of direct click-through rates.
- **Citation-Based Rewards:** Introduce commission bonuses for creators whose reviews consistently surface in conversational answers.
- **Multi-Touch & Impression Attribution:** Move beyond last-touch tracking to credit early-stage influence within compressed conversion cycles.

Key Takeaways

Resilient Growth	Evolution defines affiliate marketing in the AI era
Infrastructure First	Competitive advantage comes from modern tracking and top AI publisher partnerships.
AI Visible	Continuous auditing ensures products surface in ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot.
Attrbution Aware	Modern tracking captures zero-click touchpoints and hidden referrals.
Value Aligned	Payout structures are updated to fairly reward high-authority content partners.

3 | Peak Preparation Your Final Readiness Checklist

Based on our webinar with Conor McGann, Principle Shopping Partner Manager at Google, Jill Anderson, Director at Productcaster, and Carl Hutchinson, Performance & Strategy Director at Summit.

Executive Summary

As the retail sector approaches Golden Quarter 2026, e-commerce leaders face a fundamental transformation in consumer search behaviour, campaign management, and digital auction dynamics. Positioned as the industry's first Gemini-Powered Peak, 2026 marks the convergence of agentic artificial intelligence, conversational product discovery, and value-conscious consumer behaviour. High-intent shoppers are leveraging generative AI tools, such as Gemini, ChatGPT, and AI-driven retailer assistants, to audit prices, verify product capabilities, and establish purchase safety prior to committing capital.

This whitepaper serves as an operational strategy for retail executives, e-commerce directors, and digital marketing leaders. Synthesising macroeconomic intelligence, consumer intent analytics, and technical feed architecture, this blueprint outlines how brands can defend market share and capture profitable demand during Q4 2026.

Consumer Purchase Decision Matrix

Is the Price Real? 67%	Is the Product Right? 60%	Is the Purchase Safe? 43%
Price History	Video Reviews	Delivery Terms
Price Alerts	Human Ratings	Return Policy
Promo Codes	Store Visits	Store Trust

The New Landscape of Q4 Commerce

The Macroeconomic Climate & Market Dynamic

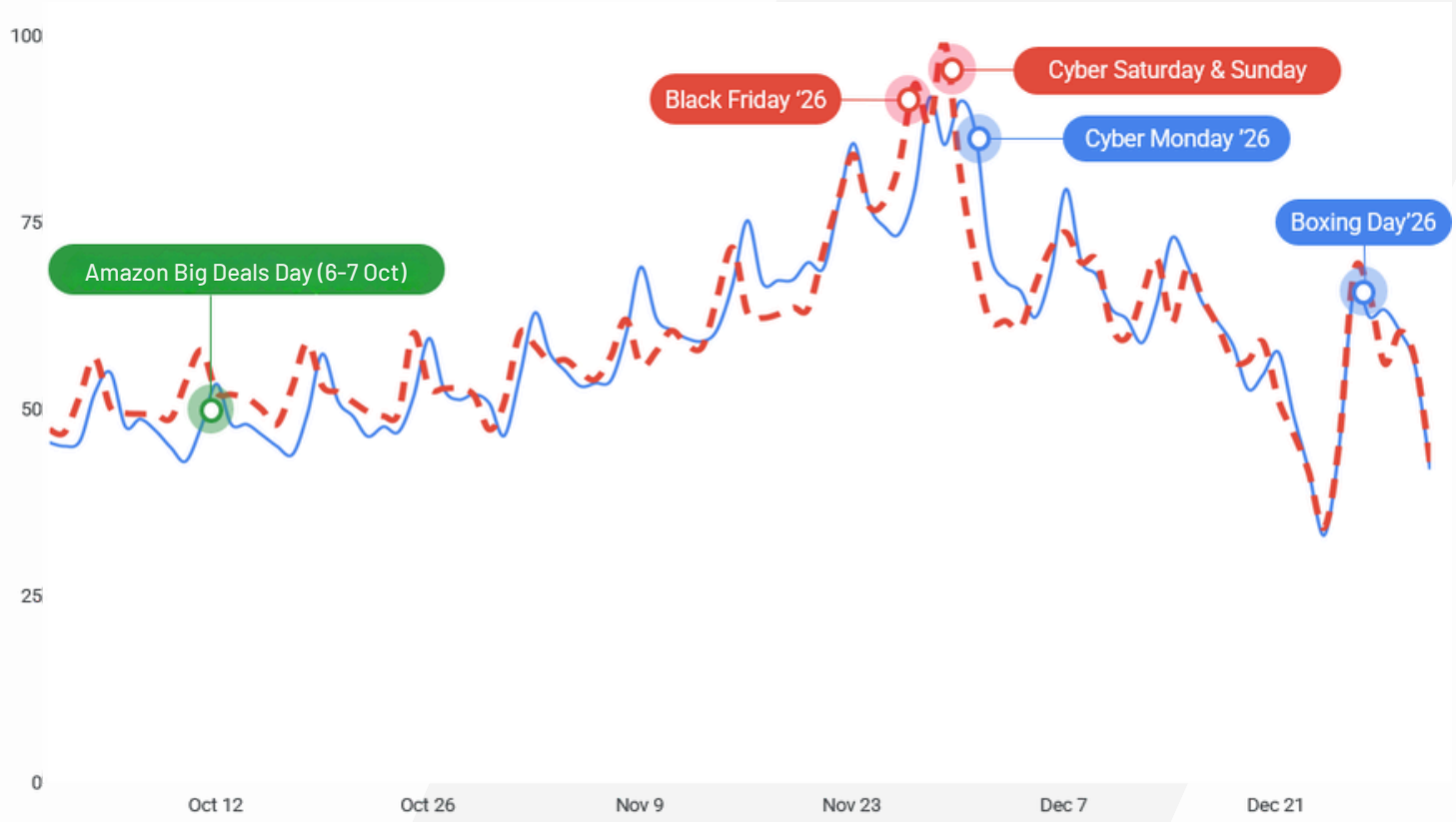
The UK e-commerce environment heading into Q4 2026 reflects a cautious economic reality. Persistent inflationary pressure, fluctuating consumer confidence, and volatile fuel costs continue to shape household spending. Additionally, policy shifts—such as the October 28th UK government budget announcement—introduce systemic market variables right before the holiday ramp-up.

Macroeconomic Metric	Value / Trend	Commercial Strategy
2026 Online Sales Growth	Forecasted at a modest +2% YoY	Capture early demand via pre-season deals
Physical Football Trends	Down -3% YoY	Deploy omnichannel / Click & Collect
eCommerce Penetration Ratio	28% of total UK retail sales	Optimise digital store & feed health
AI-Driven Traffic Uplift	+329% YoY increase in Q4	Structure data for AI Agent crawling

Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and retail benchmark reports demonstrate that while both value and volume registered consecutive months of stable growth (+1.5% overall sales increase, +4% online sales during the 2025 peak), 2026 demands strategic precision. Growth will not be uniform; it must be systematically captured from competitors.

The Evolution of the Peak Timeline: The “Triple Peak”

The classic single-day peak structure has permanently unraveled into an elongated, multi-stage sales season—frequently referred to as a "Black Month" or "Triple Peak" calendar



- **The October Halo Effect:** The season officially kicks off in early October (anchored by events like Amazon Prime Big Deal Days on October 6–7). During this period, consumers initiate broad category discovery, price tracking, and early gift sourcing.

- **Fake Friday (November 20, 2026):** Occurring exactly one week before Black Friday, "Fake Friday" registers near-peak ad click volume as deal-hungry consumers perform final audits on short-listed items.

- **The Core Peak (Black Week through Cyber Monday):** Black Friday (November 27) represents a +2% YoY growth opportunity, but the single largest growth spike occurs on Cyber Sunday (November 29), forecasted at +9% YoY growth.

- **The Late December Sprint:** A full four-week gap between Black Friday and Christmas Day allows retailers to capitalise on extended shipping cut-offs, omnichannel fulfilment (Click & Collect), and Boxing Day sales starting December 26.

The Consumer Mindset: The International Value Hunter

Shoppers in 2026 exhibit lower initial brand loyalty, with 73% of consumers open to purchasing from new retailers if value, product specification, and trust are clear. Rather than impulse-buying, consumers execute pre-purchase audits centered around three questions:

- **Is the price real? (67% of buyers):** Shoppers cross-check historical pricing, set price alerts, use price comparison engines, and look for active promo codes.
- **Is the product right? (60% of buyers):** Buyers read human-generated product reviews, watch video demonstrations, and visit physical stores to inspect items.
- **Is the purchase safe? (43% of buyers):** Shoppers evaluate merchant trustworthiness, transparent return policies, and clear shipping timelines before committing funds.

AI & Agentic Search Shift

The Gemini-Powered Landscape

2026 marks the first holiday season governed by Gemini-powered search engines, generative shopping interfaces, and agentic workflows. With Google AI Overviews reaching 2.5 billion users and conversational AI mode surpassing 1 billion monthly active users, consumer search queries have become longer, more specific, and conversational.

"Coffee Marker"	"Find me a highly rated coffee maker for small apartments that is easy to clean and under £150"
"Red Running Shoe Size 10"	"What are the best cushioned marathon shoes for wide feet with fast 2-day delivery?"

AI tools collapse the distance between initial discovery and ultimate conversion. Adoption metrics highlight this transition:

- 2025 Peak Benchmark **39%** of Black Friday buyers used AI tools
- 2026 Peak Intent **56%** of Black Friday buyers plan to use AI tools
- Direct Intent **66%** of AI users deliberately open a chatbot or retailer AI interface to inform purchase choices

Profile of the AI Shoppers

AI-driven consumers represent the market's highest-value cohort rather than casual browsers. Comparative behavioural analyses reveal key differences between AI-assisted buyers and traditional non-AI buyers:

Shopper Metric / Behaviour	AI-Assisted Shoppers	Non-AI Shoppers
Reserving purchases > €500/£500 fpr Peak	35%	18%
Purchasing specific, pre-named items	42%	27%
Purchasing across +4 retail stores	37%	26%
Holding back purchases until Peak deals	92%	82%
Expectation to spend more YoY	22%	11%

The Emerging Commercial Engine: UCP

The ongoing migration toward Agentic Engine Optimisation (AEO) requires preparing for native checkout interfaces like the Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP). UCP enables AI platforms to complete user purchases directly within conversational interfaces without requiring a traditional site redirect. To maintain eligibility, retailers must implement specific Merchant Centre data structures today:



- **Native Commerce Tag ([native_commerce]):** Signals to Google AI engines that a product SKU can be processed within native interfaces, using sub-attributes like [checkout_eligibility].
- **Consumer Notice Tag ([consumer_notice]):** Houses mandatory legal disclosures, environmental warnings, and safety information that AI engines display during agentic checkouts.

Strategic Focus Areas for Golden Quarter

To capture market share in this ecosystem, retail operations must align across six core operational pillars.

Data Foundation
Tag Gateway & CRM

Site & AEO Readiness
2026 Structured Markup

Feed Architecture
13 Core Attributes & AEO

Asset Tailoring
Visual & AI Max / PMax

Audeince Signals
First-Party & Loyalty

Automation Control
Bidding Rules & Scripts

Pillar 1: Data Foundations & Demand-Led Measurement

With auction dynamics moving rapidly during Peak, legacy batch-reporting fails to provide actionable insights. Marketing technology stacks require three structural data integrations:





1. **Google Tag Gateway:** Establishes a server-side measurement base, protecting conversion tracking from browser-level data degradation.
2. **Enhanced Conversions:** Uses hashed first-party customer data to match web conversions that would otherwise be lost to cookie consent gaps.
3. **Google Data Manager:** Ingests real-time offline CRM events into Google's bidding algorithms, enabling smart bidding based on actual unit margins rather than gross revenue.

Pillar 2: Site & AEO Readiness

AI models favour digital properties that present clear, structured, and contemporary authority signals.





- **2026 Freshness Signatures:** AI engines regularly deprioritise landing pages referencing outdated years (e.g., "Best 2025 Deals"). Ensure on-page copy, metadata, and structured schema reflect active 2026 technical specifications.
- **E-Commerce AI Auditing:** Audit landing page accessibility against agentic crawlers. Structured product information must be easily readable by non-human AI agents evaluating inventory, pricing, and warranty policies

Pillar 3: Product Feed Architecture

The product feed acts as the core database for AI shopping agents. Feed optimisation provides the highest operational return during Golden Quarter.

Attribute Pillar	Key Feed Attributes	Commercial Impact
Infrom	• Optimise Titles (+30 chars) • Detailed Descriptions (+500 chars) • Valid GTINs	**+32% Clicks** via enriched titles / descriptions
Engage	• High-res Primary Images (1500px+) • Additional Angle Imagery • Lifestyle Context Shots	**+2% Conversions** via multi-angle lifestyle shots
Highlight Trust	• Free Shipping Badges • Precise Delivery • Transparent Return Policies • Concise Highlights (3 max)	**+5% CTR** via aggregate product ratings and review counts
Show Difference	• Sale Price Annotations • Strikethrough Pricing • Promotional Extensions	**+12.3% Conversions** via clear sale price annotations

Advanced Conversational Attributes

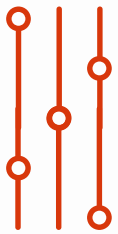
To match broad conversational queries in Gemini, feeds must include extended metadata:

Conversational Attribute	Technical Specification
Q&A	Injects common user inquiries and verified answers into the feed schema
Item Group Title	Groups complex product variants under an overarching umbrella title
Variant Option	Defines detailed attributes (e.g., exact fit, shade, material grade)
Document Link	Connects AI agents directly to user manuals and warranty docs

Popularity Rank	Passes internal sales rank data to influence recommendations
Related Product	Maps accessories, spare parts, and recommended add-ons directly

Pillar 4: Strategic Asset Tailoring

In Performance Max (PMax) and AI Max campaigns, asset quality directly influences auction rank:





- **Asset Volatility Avoidance:** Do not replace low-performing creative assets en masse right before peak sales. Instead, continuously layer new asset variations alongside evergreen assets to prevent campaign relearning phases.
- **Complete Slot Coverage:** Utilise all available text slots (15 headlines, 5 descriptions) adhering to Google best practices. Combine high-resolution custom photography (minimum 1500x1500px) with 15–30 second custom video assets.
- **Mandatory 2027 Image Rule Prep:** While Merchant Centre historically allowed smaller images, Google will mandate a 500x500px absolute minimum image size starting January 31, 2027. Brands should upgrade image catalogues to 1500x1500px ahead of Q4 2026 to maximise visual ad quality[cite: 3].

Pillar 5: Audience Signals & First-Party Data Integration

Leveraging proprietary customer data improves audience matching and ad relevance.

CRM Data Intergration	Audience Segmentation	Goal-Based Bidding
Historical Spend	High-Value VIPs	New Customer Acquisition (NCA)
Purchase Frequency	Lasped Shoppers	Loyalty Retention
Loyalty Tier	Discount Seekers	

- **CRM Integration:** Sync historical customer lists (Customer Match) to establish distinct bidding targets for high-value VIPs, lapsed buyers, and category-specific shoppers.
- **New Customer Acquisition (NCA) & Retention:** Configure target ROAS strategies with NCA value rules to bid more aggressively for new customers during peak traffic windows.
- **Loyalty Program Connectivity:** Feed loyalty tiers directly into Merchant Centre Promotions to display exclusive pricing to logged-in users[cite: 3].

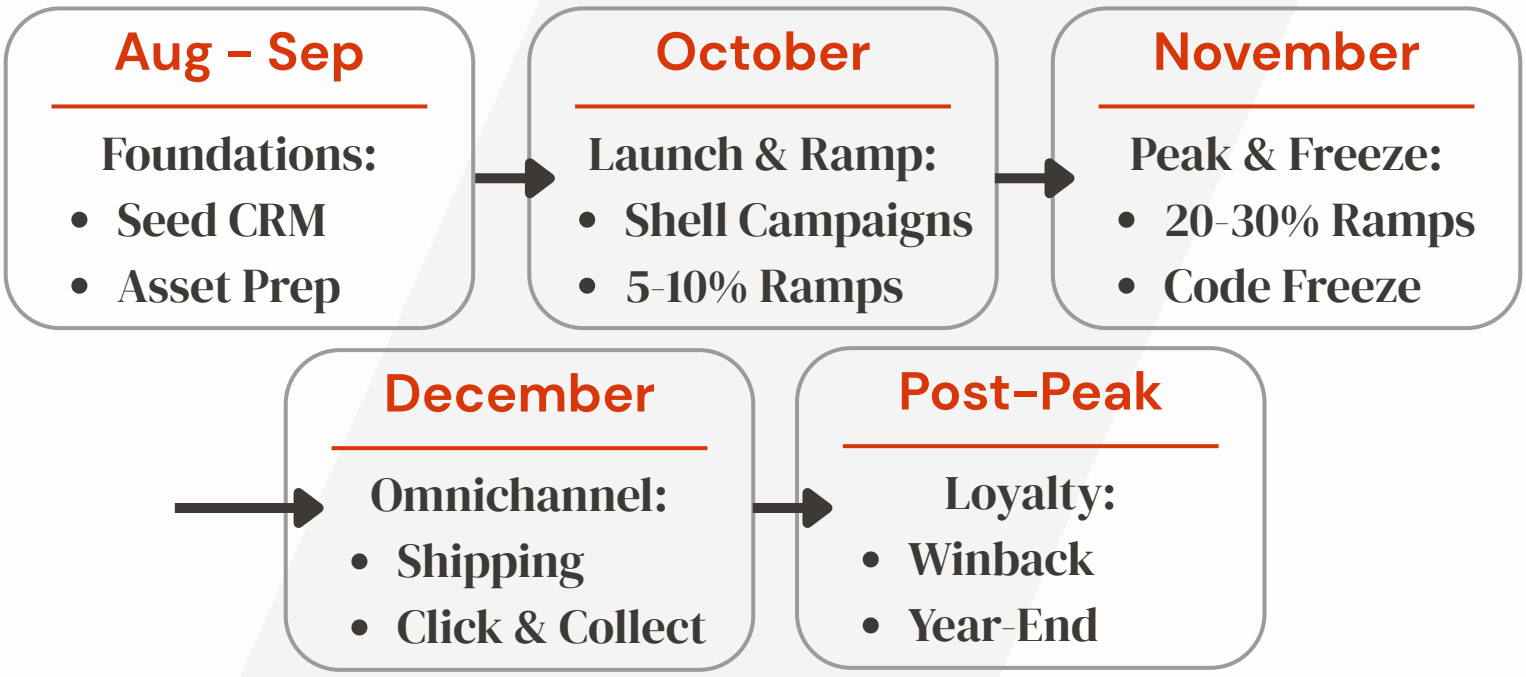
Pillar 6: Campaign Setting, Automation Control & Tech Architecture

Automation requires clear operational guardrails to prevent budget waste:

- **Automated Scripts:** Deploy automated monitoring scripts to identify budget caps, highlight out-of-stock items, and revive underperforming "zombie" campaigns.
- **Brand & Content Guardrails:** When using AI-generated ad copy and visual assets, enforce strict URL exclusions, negative keyword lists, and exact brand guidelines[cite: 3].
- **Bidding Target Management:** Avoid abrupt target ROAS (tROAS) adjustments. Keep volatility under 10% to prevent campaign re-learning[cite: 3]. To capture incremental volume during peak windows, set tROAS targets 10% below historical averages while ensuring daily budgets offer at least 10% to 20% headroom above projected spend.

Operational Execution Timeline & Tactical Checklist

Executing a successful Q4 strategy requires clear operational timing. Digital marketing teams should execute according to the following phased roadmap:



Phase 1: Foundations & Preparation [August - September]

Seed First-Party Data	Refresh and upload all CRM lists to Customer Match
Audit Feed Infrastructure	Resolve Merchant Centre disapprovals and verify that all 13 core feed attributes are populated

Finalise Strategtic Testing	Conclude AB tests on landing pages, bidding models, and feed titles
Establish Upper-Funnel Reach	Launch Demand Gen and branding campaigns to build audience pools before Q4 auction costs peak

Phase 2: Launch & Campaign Setup [October]

Build Campaign Shells	Set up promotional campaign structures, custom labels, and temporary ad extensions
Initiate Budget Scalling	Gradually ramp evergreen campaign budgets by 5% to 10% per week.
Pre-Load Promotions	Black Friday promotional codes and sale annotations to Merchant Center early to prevent approval delays.
Capitalise on October Deals	Align budget pacing with early sale events like Amazon Prime Big Deal Days (Oct 6–7).

Phase 3: The Ramp & Peak Freeze [November 1st - Cyber Week]

Accelerate Budget Pacing	Scale campaign budgets by 20% to 30% weekly heading into Fake Friday (Nov 20).
Enforce Code & Campaign Freeze	Implement a strict change freeze one week prior to Black Friday. Avoid altering tROAS targets, rebuilding campaign structures, or replacing core creatives during this window.
Deploy Peak Bidding	Upload promotional creative assets 1–2 days ahead of launch, ensuring budget headroom is available for Cyber Sunday (Nov 29).

Phase 4: Extended Holiday & Omnichannel Fulfilment [December 2nd - 24th]

Adjust Messaging for Delivery Cut-Offs	Shift campaign creative to emphasize guaranteed holiday delivery dates.
Pivot to Omnichannel	Transition lower-funnel budgets toward Local Inventory Ads (LIA) and Click & Collect promotion as shipping deadlines pass.
Remarket Non-Converters	Run targeted retargeting campaigns for high-intent shoppers who added items to carts during Black Week without completing purchases.

Phase 5: Post-Holiday & Cleanrance [December 26th - January]

Launch Clearance Creatives	Update promotional copy to reflect Boxing Day clearance and year-end inventory events.
Pivot to Retention	Shift campaign goals toward customer onboarding and loyalty activation for newly acquired Q4 customers.
Prep Image Infrastructure	Upgrade product image feeds to meet the upcoming January 31, 2027 high-resolution standard (1500x1500px recommended).

Conclusions & Recommendations

Winning Golden Quarter 2026 requires adapting to the reality of AI-driven consumer discovery. As shoppers turn to conversational AI tools to evaluate pricing, quality, and seller trust, retailers must ensure their digital data infrastructure is fully structured for both human shoppers and AI algorithms.

By executing across these strategic pillars, e-commerce organisations can build a resilient digital presence capable of outperforming competitors throughout Peak 2026 and into the next era of AI-powered commerce[cite: 2, 3].

Key Takeaways

Strengthen Feed Foundations	Prioritise rich titles, structured GTINs, high-resolution imagery, and accurate shipping and return attributes.
Prepare for Conversational Discovery	Implement modern schema attributes (Q&A, native commerce, variant specifications) to maintain eligibility in AI-driven search results.
Maintain Campaign Stability	Protect machine learning algorithms during peak traffic windows by avoiding radical bidding or creative changes during Black Week[cite: 2, 3].
Leverage First-Party Data	Use CRM-driven customer segments and value-based bidding targets to acquire high-value customers profitably[cite: 2, 3].

4 | Final Summary

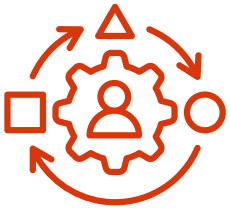
Navigating the AI Commerce Frontier

The 2026 holiday shopping season marks a permanent departure from traditional keyword search and manual browsing, cementing the arrival of Agentic Discovery as retail's new operating baseline. As conversational AI assistants, generative search engines, and automated agents redefine how consumers explore, compare, and convert, the competitive landscape has fundamentally shifted. Owning the initial conversational prompt has become the single most critical leverage point for modern retailers; whoever captures that first interaction inevitably dictates the downstream purchase journey.

To capitalise on this transformation, retailers must act on the core imperatives outlined across our three webinar sessions:



Agentic Peak Strategy: Success requires a data-first foundation, populating optional feed attributes, utilising Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP) standards, and maintaining human control over automated campaign guardrails.



Affiliates in the Era of AI Discoverability: Brands must adapt to zero-click LLM environments by shifting toward hybrid compensation models and optimising content specifically to earn citations within AI-synthesized recommendations.



Peak Preparation: Operational readiness hinges on feed integrity, robust first-party CRM data signals, and strict change freezes to protect machine learning algorithms during critical peak windows.

While AI tools continue to evolve, the fundamentals of data richness, feed accuracy, and customer trust remain non-negotiable. The brands that take decisive action to align their systems, partner networks, and marketing teams today will not only dominate this Golden Quarter but will define the future of digital commerce for years to come.

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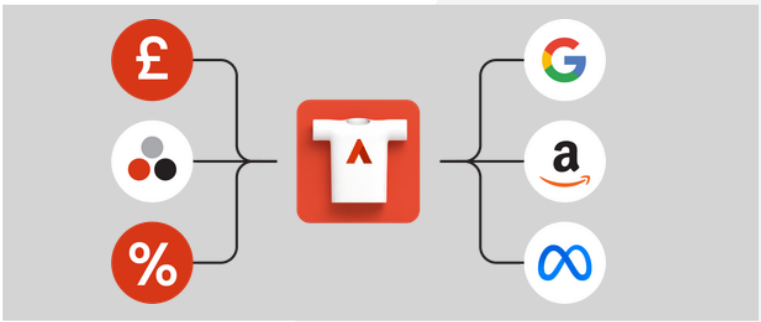

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