



MEDIA IMPACT REPORT

The Q4 Media Marketplace: What Advertisers Need to Know

Also in this issue:

Beyond Basic Personas: Using AI to Build a Decision Operating System

Football Season is Coming: Are Advertisers Ready for the Viewership Lift?

The Q4 Medicare Advertising Surge



/BRIEFING ROOM

The Q4 Media Marketplace: What Advertisers Need to Know

By **Sheila Clough**, Director, Integrated Media Investment

As advertisers head into the most wonderful time of the year, also known as Q4, the marketplace is poised for intensified competition driven by seasonal demand, heavy viewing of premium content, political spending, and year-end investment activity. Success in this environment will require proactive planning, flexibility, and a willingness to adapt to evolving consumer media behaviors. We've provided an outline of our top-5 considerations and recommendations to navigate key marketplace dynamics expected to shape Q4. Advertisers can use these strategies to maximize reach, efficiency, and performance during one of the most competitive periods of the year.

1. Secure inventory early as Q4 demand intensifies

- Inventory pressure will increase significantly due to Medicare Annual Election Period, midterm election campaigning, holiday retail activity, NFL/sports programming, and overall year-end scatter demand.
- Midterm election spending should be contained to the local and regional level, but spending is predicted to be significant.

California, Texas, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, and Wisconsin should all see significant investment due to heavily contested races.

2. Diversify beyond traditional media channels

- Consumer attention continues to shift toward CTV, podcasts, YouTube, and digital platforms.
- Advertisers should build multi-channel plans to reach audiences across an increasingly fragmented media landscape and reduce reliance on constrained inventory sources.



2026 Q3-Q5 Broadcast Calendar

Q3	Q4 2026			"Q5"
Sept.	October	November	December	Dec. 25-31
We are here.	10/31: Halloween	11/11: Veterans Day 11/26: Thanksgiving 11/27: Black Friday 11/30: Cyber Monday	12/4: Hanukkah begins 12/12: Hanukkah ends 12/24: Christmas Eve 12/25: Christmas Day	Low-cost media opportunities post-holiday shopping season.

3. Lean into automation and performance-focused buying

- Platforms are expanding AI-powered optimization and automated buying tools, including solutions from CTV platforms, Pinterest, Peacock, Paramount, Snapchat, and other partners.
- Automation should be considered a baseline strategy to improve efficiency and help achieve KPI and cost-per-acquisition goals.

4. Sports and premium live content remain highly competitive

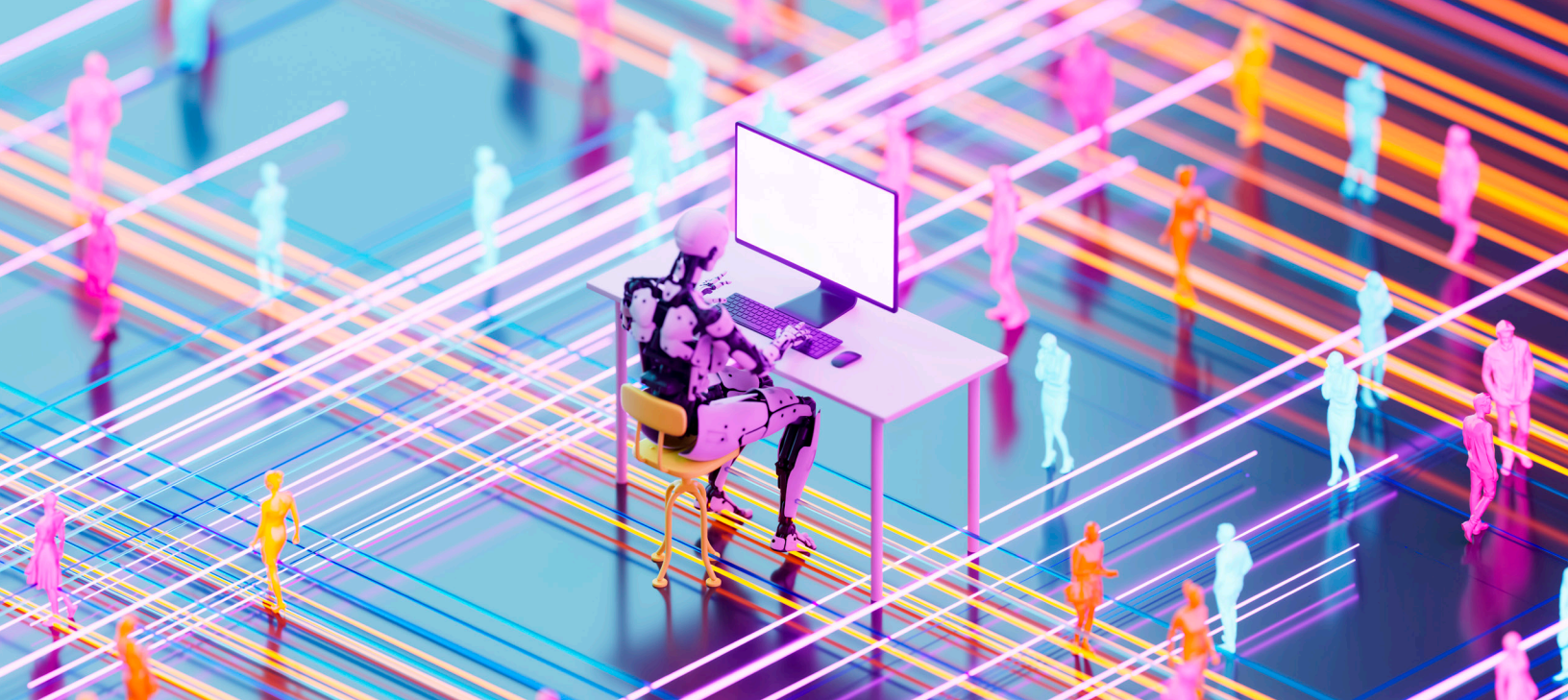
- While overall linear viewership and costs have been trending down, inventory in sports and other live tentpoles have shown year-over-year increases in linear TV viewing, making them the tightest (and most expensive) areas of the marketplace.
- This leads to strong demand across NFL, college football, MLB postseason, and women's sports that is compounded further with highest ever Super Bowl rate and significant match spend required by Disney.
- Advertisers planning to leverage sports should secure placements early and expect pricing pressure.

5. Take advantage of Q5 opportunities after Christmas.

- The period between Christmas and New Year's ("Q5") typically offers some of the lowest advertising costs of the year while media consumption remains elevated.
- Advertisers can benefit from lower CPMs and improved efficiency by running campaigns through year-end rather than ending at Christmas.
- One exception could be bigger Bowl Games and NFL Playoffs; if those are a must-have for your Q4 strategy, it is best to secure early.

What's the TL;DR? Plan early, diversify channels, embrace automation, lock in premium inventory soon, and reserve budget for post-Christmas "Q5" opportunities.





/NOTEPAD

Beyond Basic Personas: Using AI to Build a Decision Operating System

By [Susan Boland](#), SVP, Brand Strategy, & [Kathleen Donahue](#), Associate Director, Brand Strategy

Most brands still treat personas as static portraits; built once a year from CRM data, research, and third-party data sources. Personas feel strategic but do not keep pace with an always-on highly dynamic media environment. Many teams are now using AI to create personas quickly, yet they're missing the real opportunity: evolving personas from descriptive archetypes into decision operating systems that actively determine who sees what, when, and under what conditions—routing media budget, creative, and experiences across the ecosystem in real time.

The real question is not “How do we use AI to build better personas?” It is “who is designing the operating system that AI is running on—and are we comfortable with the decisions it’s making on our behalf?”

And that question redefines the role of the Strategist. Their job is no longer to write clever persona narratives; it is to act as the architect of the customer decision operating system—deciding which audiences’ matter, what “good” looks like, and what are the AI guardrails.

Personas as the Operating Systems for AI Decisions — and the Strategist as Architect

AI has made it easy to discover patterns: clusters of behaviors, propensities, and micro segments no human could see on their own. The real step-change is using personas and segments as the operating system for those models—and making the Strategist the architect of that system.

In practical terms, that means a persona is no longer just “who they are” and “what they care about.” It becomes a set of clear, simple rules that AI must follow when it interacts with that audience.

The Strategist’s Mandate

The Strategist’s role is to architect and govern the decision operating system—using AI to uncover patterns, identify changing needs, and test what works, while ensuring those insights are translated into choices the business can stand behind.

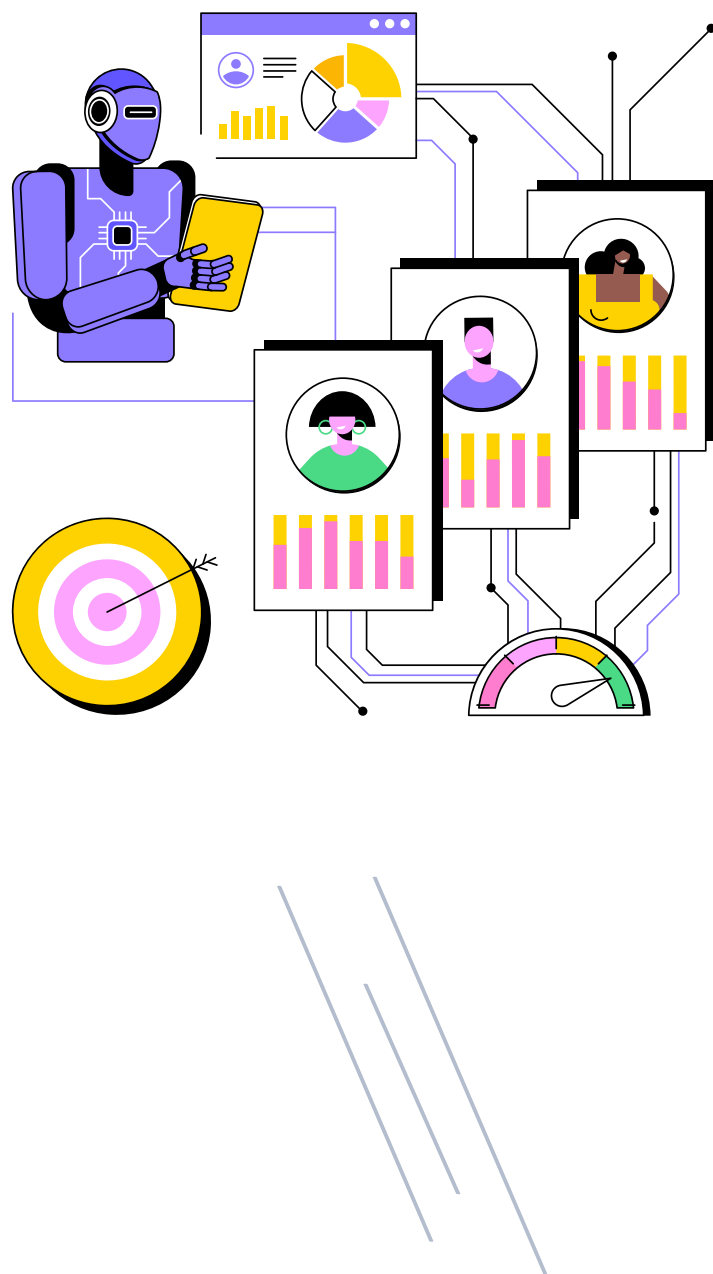
Grounded in audience research, brand strategy, business goals and regulatory requirements, the Strategist defines the priorities, permissions, protections, measures of success that guide AI-driven decisions. They partner with data, product, engineering, legal, and risk teams to turn these choices into decision logic the system can use—and continuously refine as customer behavior and business conditions change.

What the Strategist Defines

- Which audiences matter most, and why they matter to the business.
- What each audience should be offered, protected from, or guided toward.
- Where the non-negotiable red lines sit across suitability, risk, brand integrity, and customer experience.
- How success should be measured beyond immediate conversion.
- When human judgment or intervention is required rather than allowing an automated recommendation or route to proceed.

In practical terms, a “First-Time Investor” persona can see diversified starter portfolios and robo-funds but is screened out of options trading or leveraged products even if their income may qualify them. A “Time Strapped Minimalist” is routed to the shortest low-friction paths (one-click renewals, simple explanations) and is shielded from long exploratory flows.

AI can help the Strategist see more: hidden patterns, emerging needs, changing behaviors and unintended outcomes across audiences. But it cannot decide what the brand should optimize for, what customers should be protected from, or where the organization’s hard lines belong. The Strategist remains accountable for those decisions—using AI to make the operating system smarter, while ensuring it remains intentional, responsible, and aligned to what is right for both the customer and the business.





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Football Season is Coming: Are Advertisers Ready for the Viewership Lift?

By **Allison Duggan**, Media Supervisor, Rainstorm Direct

Football remains one of the few media environments that consistently delivers scaled, engaged audiences in an increasingly fragmented marketplace. As marketers finalize Q4 plans, the data suggests football season is more than just a programming opportunity; it's a catalyst for meaningful audience growth.

According to Nielsen data, overall viewership across NFL and College Football networks increased 10% during the first four weeks of football season compared to the prior four-week average in 2025-2026, reinforcing the sport's ability to attract incremental audiences when the season kicks off.

The impact is even more pronounced when looking at the NFL game nights. During the first four weeks of the regular season, Thursday through Sunday viewership increased 29% compared to the previous four weeks, driven primarily by gains on major broadcast networks. FOX experienced a 59% increase, CBS increased 39%, and NBC grew 17%.

College Football delivered similar momentum. Following the start of the regular season, Saturday viewership increased 34% compared to the prior four-week period, with significant gains across

ESPN, FOX, ABC, and conference-focused networks. ESPN networks in particular saw dramatic increases, highlighting the growing demand for college football content beyond traditional marquee matchups.

For advertisers, these trends present an important opportunity. Football doesn't just bring larger audiences. It delivers consistent reach during a time of year when marketers face increasing competition from holiday advertisers, political spending, and Medicare Open Enrollment campaigns.

The challenge, however, is that premium football inventory can be expensive and increasingly difficult to secure. Fortunately, there are several efficient and opportunistic ways to gain access to football audiences without competing solely for the highest-profile games:

- DIRECTV Monday Night Football inventory can offer access to highly engaged NFL viewers through alternative buying opportunities.
- ESPN local break inventory within College Football and Monday Night Football can provide a more cost-efficient entry point into premium live sports environments.

- Consider games within smaller conferences rather than marquee matchups. While championship contenders and top-ranked teams command premium pricing, many smaller conference games still deliver strong audiences at a fraction of the cost.

As the season begins, advertisers who secure inventory early and remain flexible in their buying strategies are often best positioned to capitalize on the surge in viewership. The data is clear: football season consistently drives audience growth across broadcast and cable networks, creating valuable opportunities for brands seeking incremental reach and engagement during the most competitive quarter of the year.

The takeaway: Football continues to be one of television's most reliable audience drivers. Brands that plan ahead and look beyond the obvious inventory opportunities can leverage the season's viewership lift without paying a premium for every game.



/QUICK HITS



NWSL, Roku Sign
Media-Rights Deal
Through 2027

[\[Sports Business Journal\]](#)



TV Measurement Companies
Comscore, iSpot, and VideoAmp
Get New Vote of Confidence

[\[Adweek\]](#)



Some Companies
Are Using Ads
To Influence AI Agents

[\[Marketing Brew\]](#)



/NOTEPAD

The Q4 Medicare Advertising Surge: How Advertisers Can Prepare for One of the Year's Most Competitive Marketplaces

By ***Sarah Brennan***, Director, Growth & Development, Rainstorm Direct

Every year, the fourth quarter brings heightened competition across the media landscape as advertisers compete for consumer attention during the holiday shopping season. For television advertisers, however, another major force significantly impacts inventory availability and pricing: Medicare insurance coverage.

The Medicare Annual Enrollment Period (AEP) runs from October 15 through December 7, creating a concentrated surge in advertising activity as health insurers compete to reach Medicare-eligible consumers. MediaRadar data shows Medicare advertisers averaged approximately \$14 million in weekly television spend during AEP in 2024 and 2025, with spending peaking during the core enrollment weeks before dropping sharply after December 7.

While Medicare category TV spending declined 15-20% year over year, enrollment advertising remains one of the largest seasonal drivers of Q4 television demand. For advertisers outside the category, understanding its impact can help protect performance and uncover opportunities.

Why Medicare Has Such a Large Impact on the TV Marketplace

Medicare spending is highly concentrated across specific networks, dayparts, and commercial formats. More than 50% of category spending is directed to just 20 networks, including CBS, Fox News, CNN, Hallmark, ION, USA, Univision, and MSNBC.

The category also heavily favors daytime programming, with approximately 55% of spending occurring during daytime hours and a significant share in early fringe. In addition, nearly 90% of Medicare spending is delivered through :60 and :120-second spots.

As enrollment activity ramps up in late October and continues through early December, advertisers targeting similar audiences often experience tighter inventory, reduced clearance rates, and increased pricing pressure.

What Advertisers Should Expect

Increased Competition for Premium Inventory

Brands targeting older consumers, broad national audiences, healthcare, financial services, insurance, home services, and direct response audiences frequently find themselves competing for the same inventory Medicare advertisers rely on.

More Pressure on Daytime Inventory

Because most Medicare spending occurs during daytime and early fringe when call centers are operating, advertisers relying heavily on those dayparts should expect less availability and greater competition.

Rapidly Changing Marketplace Conditions

Medicare spending accelerates quickly after enrollment begins, peaks in the middle weeks of the season, and falls sharply after December 7. As a result, inventory availability and pricing can change significantly from week to week.

Five Ways to Successfully Navigate Open Enrollment Season

1. Build Flexibility Into Your Plan

Avoid overly rigid weekly delivery requirements. Managing toward monthly or quarterly objectives provides greater flexibility as inventory availability shifts throughout the season.

2. Secure Inventory Early

Locking in priority spots, holiday programming, and key network inventory before enrollment begins can help avoid marketplace constraints later in the quarter. Quarterly scatter agreements may also provide additional protection.

3. Diversify Creative Lengths

With Medicare advertisers overwhelmingly utilizing :60 and :120-second spots, incorporating :15 and :30-second creative can provide greater flexibility and improve access to available inventory.

4. Expand Your TV Mix

Consider broadening your footprint beyond traditional broadcast and national cable by exploring satellite, unwired inventory, and digi-networks. The more diversified your plan, the more options you'll have when competition intensifies.

5. Broaden Your Daypart Strategy

Prime and weekend programming often face less enrollment-related pressure than daytime. Expanding beyond traditional dayparts can help maintain delivery and uncover efficiency opportunities.

Turning a Marketplace Challenge Into an Advantage

The goal during AEP isn't to outspend Medicare advertisers. It's to be more adaptable.

As Medicare advertising drives significant television demand between October 15 and December 7, brands with flexible budgets, diversified inventory strategies, multiple creative lengths, and broader daypart approaches will be better positioned to maintain performance throughout one of the year's most competitive media environments.

In Q4, flexibility isn't just a planning tactic. It's a competitive advantage.

Need More Guidance?



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