

# Above the Fold: Q1 2026 Report

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The first quarter of 2026 made one thing very clear: the business side of publishing is being forced to operate in several realities at once.

Teams are dealing with immediate revenue pressure, unstable traffic patterns, shifting buyer behavior, AI-fueled disruption, and growing demands on already strained operations. That tension is shaping decisions everywhere; in yield strategy, in staffing, in workflows, in audience development, and in the ongoing question of where publishers can still build durable leverage.

What comes through in this report is how much the conversation has sharpened. Publishers are asking harder questions, getting more specific about what is and is not working, and spending less time on abstractions that do not translate into revenue, efficiency, or control.

There is a stronger pull toward owned audience relationships, cleaner systems, more useful automation, and metrics that reflect actual business health rather than surface-level performance. The tone across the community is practical, impatient, and increasingly clear-eyed about what this moment requires.

This report reflects that shift. It brings together the concerns, patterns, and operational signals that kept surfacing across the quarter as an active-command manual for the people making revenue, operations, audience, and product decisions in real time.

The goal here is to help industry stakeholders inside the business side of publishing to get more precise about where they are under pressure, where they still have room to move, and where sharper action matters most now.

# The "Revenue Now" Mandate: Balancing Immediate Wins with Sustainable Growth

## HERE'S THE LOWDOWN

Publishers are facing intense pressure to replace declining organic traffic with immediate, short-term revenue, sparking a "revenue now" mandate. Instead of relying solely on long-term macro strategies, teams are hunting for unturned stones to quickly boost yield without overhauling their entire infrastructure.

This involves deploying tools that deliver immediate ROI, such as in-view ad refreshing, dynamic e-commerce integrations, and push notification re-engagement to maximize the value of current site visitors.

At the same time, the industry recognizes that traffic alone is no longer a viable safety net. While securing quick programmatic wins, publishers must also build their "next river" of sustainable income by diversifying into off-platform revenue, audience extension, and treating their first-party data as a renewable asset.

## WHAT OUR COMMUNITY IS SAYING

Behind closed doors, operators are frustrated by the constant shifting of KPIs – from programmatic yield to subscriptions, and now to immediate top-line revenue. There is a palpable urgency to find solutions that do not require heavy developer resources or massive site overhauls.

The community is actively crowdsourcing "RevenueScape" lists to categorize immediate revenue drivers like exit-intent monetization, ad block recovery, and rich media units.

However, operators caution that simply stuffing more ads onto a page dilutes overall value and harms the user experience. Instead, the consensus is shifting toward "Revenue Per Session" (RPS) as the ultimate north star.

By focusing on increasing session length and deep engagement, publishers can squeeze more value from existing traffic while systematically investing in owned channels to weather search volatility.

## HERE ARE YOUR ACTION ITEMS

1. **Publishers:** Run an immediate revenue audit by reviewing SSP invoices line by line to identify hidden take-rates and recapture missing margins.
2. **Ad Operations Management:** Implement full-stack ad block recovery and payer consent models to immediately reclaim lost revenue from unmonetized traffic without needing heavy development work.
3. **Ad Operations Management:** Deploy smart refresh technology that only triggers when viewability and CPM uplift guarantees are met, squeezing more revenue out of existing sessions without hurting the user experience.
4. **Publishers:** Diversify beyond on-site impressions by utilizing "Audience Extension" to monetize your first-party data and reach your audience off-platform.
5. **Ad Operations Management:** Evaluate and integrate tools for exit-intent monetization, push notifications, and dynamic e-commerce units to instantly extend session length and drive incremental yield.
6. **Publishers:** Manage off-platform revenue (like AI text-to-video and social media syndication) as a standalone P&L rather than treating it as a mere add-on to owned-and-operated properties.
7. **Ad Operations Management:** Bridge the gap between engineering and ad ops by identifying if your developer backlog is the actual bottleneck for ad tech improvements, and seek low-code implementation partners to bypass it.

8. **Industry:** Provide publishers with lightweight, easily integrated "revenue now" solutions that require minimal developer resources and do not disrupt existing ad stacks.

## What the **Full 44-Page Report** Also Covers

- Navigating VUCA: Redefining Publisher Strategies
- CPM Revenue Trends
- The "Middle is Eroding": Quality vs. Made-for-Advertising (MFA)
- Publishers + AI: Navigating the Hype, the Hacks, + the Chumbox
- Programmatic Pipes: Adapting to New Integrations + Market Realities
- Mobile App Monetization: Navigating Metrics, Formats, + Infrastructure
- Rethinking Brand Safety: From Theater to Performance
- CTV Monetization: Fragmentation, Multiscreen Habits, + Premium Yield
- Commerce Media: Navigating Retail Demand, Agentic Shopping, + Trust
- Privacy + Compliance: Navigating Migrations, Regulations, + Consent
- LiveIntent Lift Decline
- Outstream Video Partner Performance
- Google Ad Manager: Actionable Strategies to Maximize Platform Value
- Ad Ops Issues: Airing of the Grievances
- Publisher Representation: Earning a Seat at the Table

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