

# The 2026 Guide to Experimentation for Modern Marketers

A strategic blueprint for faster, evidence-based decisions in a changing retail landscape.

# Executive Summary

2026 marks a turning point for U.S. manufacturers. Category growth is slowing, private label is gaining momentum, and shopper behavior is more unpredictable across generations, life stages, and geographies. Winning teams will operationalize experimentation, using real in-store signals to guide decisions on pricing, shelving, packaging, innovation, activation, and ad spend effectiveness.

## Sections

1. Why Experimentation is Essential
2. What You Should Test in 2026
3. Partnering for Effective Testing
4. Your Competitive Edge



# 1. Why experimentation is essential

U.S. manufacturers face mounting pressure from shifting shopper behaviors, intense value seeking, and growing private label share. Circana's analysis shows consumers stretching budgets and adding more value and private label products to their carts. In parallel, increasing audience fragmentation heightens the need for ad spend optimization to reach shoppers in the moments and channels where they are most receptive. Together, these dynamics increase the urgency for manufacturers to validate strategies with precision.<sup>1</sup>

Generational dynamics add additional complexity. Circana's The Aging Arc report shows that Boomers and Gen X control the majority of today's retail spending, while Gen Z and Millennials will drive more than 60 percent of retail sales growth by 2030. Boomers are expected to transfer about 124 trillion dollars in wealth by 2048, significantly expanding Millennial purchasing power and accelerating their influence over category performance. Testing must read both groups. Older shoppers prioritize clarity and familiarity, while younger shoppers reward novelty, sustainability, and discovery.<sup>2</sup>



Circana discretionary spending insights show that women represent 59 percent of U.S. discretionary general merchandise spending. Their demand was flat in the first half of 2025, while men saw a 3 percent unit increase. Women are cutting back more quickly in key general merchandise categories.<sup>3</sup> This increases the stakes of packaging, value communication, and in-store activation tests targeted to female household decision makers.

As consumer behavior continues to evolve, media investment strategies are shifting accordingly. Growth in retail media networks (RMNs), increasing geo-fenced and location-aware targeting, and fragmentation across channels are creating more opportunities – but also more complexity – for marketers. These trends amplify the need for rapid, scalable measurement that keeps pace with real-time campaign optimization. Liquid Testing directly addresses this need by enabling marketers to quickly identify which media tactics, audiences, and placements are driving incremental lift. By measuring performance within specific geo-fenced areas or across RMN environments, brands can understand what's working earlier in the campaign cycle and reallocate budgets with confidence. This agility not only improves in-flight decision-making but also maximizes overall media efficiency and return on spend.

We are committed to privacy safe measurement, and Liquid Testing delivers this by using only aggregated POS sales data with no individual level information. By comparing test and control geographies, it provides accurate incrementality without tracking people. This makes it a simple, compliant, and future proof way to measure sales impact.

Circana's ShopperSights™ data shows geography compounds these differences. Metro shoppers respond strongly to in-aisle cues, discovery, and value communication, while rural shoppers display significantly lower reactivity but very stable patterns. The behavioral gap between metro and rural shoppers can be ten to twenty times higher on certain measures, making national assumptions unreliable.<sup>5</sup>

The emerging reality is clear. Testing can no longer be episodic or reserved for major initiatives. Manufacturers need continuous learning loops supported by cross-functional teams and real in-store sales results.

## From Episodic Testing to Continuous Learning

Manufacturers must shift from treating tests as one-time events to embedding experimentation into the operating rhythm.

Four key shifts define this mindset:

1

Frequent micro-tests replace large, isolated tests. Micro-tests reduce risk and help teams course-correct quickly.

2

The goal shifts from proof to learning. Testing provides clarity to guide decisions – it's an enabler, not a hurdle.

3

Actionable confidence becomes more valuable than perfected answers. Faster signals outperform slow, highly engineered tests, especially in rapidly changing environments.

4

Testing becomes cross-functional. Brand, insights, sales, shopper, and finance teams all contribute to test design, interpretation, and decision-making.



## 2. What You Should Test in 2026

A prioritized roadmap helps manufacturers focus on the most valuable in-store changes. The savviest marketers use this prioritized roadmap:

### Priority 1. Price and Promotion Architecture

Price and promotion remain the strongest economic levers.

#### Questions testing can answer:

- What promotion depth drives incremental lift
- How shoppers respond to value cues by geography or income
- Which price tiers influence trade-up or trade-down

#### Why this matters:

Value-seeking is intensifying. SNAP households account for roughly 20 percent of CPG sales and make 22 percent more trips than non-SNAP shoppers. Private label is growing across income cohorts.<sup>4</sup> These conditions make pricing and promotion one of the highest-impact testing areas. Circana data shows that Gen Z and Millennial shoppers respond quickly to price cues due to high trip frequency. Suburban shoppers are particularly sensitive to value and pack size clarity, which creates clean environments for pricing tests.<sup>5</sup>



## Priority 2. Packaging and Claims

Packaging drives discoverability, trust, and conversion. It also intersects with sustainability and labeling expectations.

### Questions testing can answer:

- Whether simplified or modernized packaging improves conversion
- Which claims drive lift
- Whether size, material, or format influences trial

### Why this matters:

Packaging drives discoverability and conversion. Sustainability-marketed CPG products have grown at a 12.4 percent compound annual rate since 2019, more than double conventional products. They represent about 24 percent of the market but contributed more than 40 percent of total growth over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> This reinforces the need to test sustainable materials, modern designs, and clearer benefit communication.

Circana data shows Gen Z and Millennials are highly reactive to packaging. Seasonal periods show higher intent to buy soon, which increases the visibility of lift. Metro shoppers significantly over-index on choosing a store because they noticed appealing or high-quality packaging, while rural shoppers under-index sharply on this behavior, which demonstrates why geography should shape test design.<sup>5</sup>

## Priority 3. Shelf, Adjacencies, and Navigability

The shelf is the central decision point for many categories.

### Questions testing can answer:

- Whether eye-level placement strengthens conversion
- Which adjacencies drive cross-category growth
- Whether simplified navigation improves basket size
- How cultural cues influence purchase behavior

### Why this matters:

Shelf conditions influence in-store decision-making more than any other touchpoint. Circana insights show Hispanic shoppers represent roughly 180 billion dollars in annual CPG spend and over-index on in-store shopping. They value bilingual communication, culturally relevant cues, and family-oriented pack sizes.<sup>7</sup>

Circana data shows metro shoppers display strong discovery-led behavior. They heavily over-index on natural or organic format preference, compared to rural areas. These differences show that shelf clarity and organization affect different shoppers in different ways. Experiments help quantify the impact.<sup>5</sup>

## Priority 4. In-Store Activation and Shopper Touchpoints

Activation programs must deliver measurable outcomes.

### Questions testing can answer:

- Which touchpoints drive incremental lift
- How retail media exposure influences in-store behavior
- Which messages convert at the shelf

### Why this matters:

Circana data shows that metro shoppers exhibit much higher store-switching behavior, not only because they have more options but because they react more quickly to promotions, signage, and shelf conditions. These stores reveal behavioral shifts earlier, which makes them powerful signal-generating environments for experimentation.<sup>5</sup> SNAP households make more trips and engage with in-store communication more frequently.<sup>4</sup> This means that in-store communication, signage, and activation can significantly influence where and how these shoppers buy.

## Priority 5. New Product Incrementality

Innovation requires validation before scale.

### Questions testing can answer:

- Whether a new SKU grows category dollars
- Which markets or store types to launch first
- What starting assortment size maximizes performance
- How product attributes perform among generational segments
- Does my new product increase or cannibalize existing brand sales

### Why this matters:

Circana's new product guidance highlights the importance of pre-launch insights, forecasting, and clear success criteria. In-store experimentation provides the final validation.<sup>8</sup> Circana data shows that Gen Z and Millennial shoppers act as powerful early indicators. Their openness to discovery helps manufacturers understand whether innovations will resonate.<sup>10</sup>

## Priority 6. Joint Retail Tests

Retailers expect manufacturers to bring test-ready ideas.

### Questions testing can answer:

- Which assortment strategies grow category dollars
- Which planograms drive conversion
- How layout changes influence mission-driven trips
- How and why my advertising was successful
- Which campaign elements are most effective

### Why this matters:

Circana data shows that geographic differences of 10 to 20 times between metro and rural shoppers make these tests essential for predicting where ideas will win and where adjustments are needed.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, private label gains in club, value channels, and mass increase the pressure to demonstrate category growth.<sup>9</sup> Media Lift supports this need through a range of sales based measurement approaches — including Test & Learn, tactical comparisons, and mid campaign analysis — enabling faster, more cost effective decision-making.<sup>9</sup>



# 3. Partnering for Effective Testing: Media Effectiveness & Advertiser Experimentation.

## Why Media Experimentation Matters for Publishers

Advertisers are under increasing pressure to validate that their media spend is driving real, incremental sales—not just upper funnel signals. As third-party cookies deprecate and consumer privacy expectations heighten, brands are demanding privacy safe,

sales-based measurement that can quantify the true impact of their media across markets, geographies, and audiences. Publishers who can reliably demonstrate lift become indispensable partners in shaping advertisers' performance strategies.

## Priority: Media Effectiveness & Creative Performance Testing

### Key Questions Advertisers Need Publishers to Answer:

1. How do I measure the sales impact of my non-addressable or upper-funnel media?
2. Which creative messages drive the strongest incremental lift before going national?
3. Where, how, and why did my media influence instore behavior and purchasing?
4. How does performance vary across stores, markets, states, and shopper segments?
5. How can I optimize spending across channels and formats to maximize ROAS?

### Why This Matters for Publishers:

Publishers are increasingly expected to bring test ready insight rich proposals that prove their media can influence real world sales—not just impressions or engagement. With growing fragmentation and rising scrutiny on every advertising dollar, advertisers need partners who can provide:

- Incremental sales lift measurement tied to verified retail sales data
- Granular geographic reads (store, market, DMA, state) to refine activation strategies
- Creative benchmarking to identify what works before national rollouts
- Privacy-safe experimentation, leveraging aggregate POS data instead of user-level tracking
- Clear, actionable insights that differentiate publisher inventory in competitive pitches

Modern publishers who operationalize continuous testing not only help advertisers validate the ROI of their campaigns—they also strengthen their own ad sales positioning by proving that their environments drive bottom funnel impact.

## How Publishers Can Lead with Experimentation

Winning publishers integrate sales-based experimentation into their go-to-market strategy by:

- Bringing pre-built test frameworks that make it easy for advertisers to opt in
- Providing transparent, causal lift measurement to validate media effectiveness
- Offering creative A/B testing at scale

### Specific to different publisher segments:

#### 1. Retail Media Networks (RMNs)

##### **Positioning:**

RMNs sit closest to the point of purchase—and can uniquely connect media exposure to verified sales results. With rising scrutiny on ROAS and the collapse of third-party cookies, brands expect RMNs to prove how onsite, offsite, and instore media influence actual shopping behavior.

##### **Core Message:**

Retail Media Networks that pair closed loop audience targeting privacy safe, store and market level sales measurement will become indispensable partners for advertisers seeking bottom funnel accountability.

##### **Where This Wins:**

Brands struggling to prove the value of nonaddressable or upper funnel tactics can rely on RMNs for causal, actionable sales outcomes that guide spend decisions.

- Using market-level insights to guide investment decisions and audience strategies
- Creating repeatable test-and-learn programs that position the publisher as a long-term performance partner

This approach allows publishers to move beyond selling inventory—toward selling proven outcomes.

##### **Key Proof Points for RMNs**

- Only RMNs can tie exposure to real instore incrementality, not inferred behaviors.
- Market level testing identifies which SKUs, stores, or DMAs respond strongest to the ad exposure.
- Creative or format A/B tests help advertisers validate what works before scaling nationally.
- Incremental sales lift—expressed in absolute dollars and ROAS—positions the RMN as a performance media engine, not just a retail channel.

## 2. CTV Publishers

### Positioning:

CTV offers premium reach, but advertisers increasingly demand proof that TV-quality environments deliver real, incremental sales. With high fragmentation and premium CPMs, CTV publishers must validate that their inventory moves product—not just attention.

### Core Message:

Salesbased experimentation transforms CTV from a reach vehicle into a provable performance channel, helping advertisers quantify the incremental impact of premium video on real-world purchasing.

### Where This Wins:

Highvalue categories (CPG, household, beverages, OTC) that want TV like storytelling with measurable, bottom funnel results.

## 3. Retail Media Providers (NonRMN)

(This refers to technology platforms, networks selling third-party retail data, or providers powering offsite activations.)

### Positioning:

Retail media providers enable scale and flexibility, but advertisers increasingly expect transparent, causal measurement—not just clickthrough or modeled attribution.

### Core Message:

Retail media providers who integrate test ready measurement solutions can offer advertisers a fully accountable media ecosystem, providing lift across offsite display, social, and video without compromising privacy.

### Where This Wins:

Brands evaluating cross platform media or looking to unify retail and nonretail media under one measurement framework.

### Key Proof Points for RMNs

- CTV can now be evaluated using store level Liquid Testing tests to isolate lift.
- Creative rotations can be tested to identify which spots deliver the strongest incremental impact.
- Geographic lift reads (DMA, state, market) help brands understand where premium video performs best.
- Privacy-safe measurement aligns with evolving television industry standards and avoids user level data reliance.

### Key Proof Points for RMNs

- Ability to run geo based lift tests across all digital channels—not just retail-owned media.
- Demonstrates which audiences, formats, and partners drive true incrementality on the shelf.
- Empowers advertisers to optimize budgets across channels using sales, not proxies.
- Increases credibility with retailers and brands by providing independent validation.

#### 4. Premium Content Publishers

(News, lifestyle, entertainment, sports, cultural publishers.)

##### **Positioning:**

Premium publishers offer high trust environments and engaged audiences, but advertisers often struggle to prove that these high-quality impressions translate into measurable sales impact.

##### **Core Message:**

Experimentation allows premium publishers to prove that attention-rich environments drive superior incremental sales, helping advertisers justify investment in premium content.

##### **Where This Wins:**

Advertisers seeking brand safe, contextually relevant placements that still deliver quantifiable performance.

##### **Key Proof Points for RMNs**

- Store or market level lift tests validate that premium environments influence real purchasing behavior.
- Creative and contextual testing identify which storylines, formats, and content adjacencies perform best.
- Sales results strengthen upfront negotiations and help beat lower cost competitors.
- Ability to demonstrate value without relying on cookies or user level identifiers.



## 4. Your Competitive Edge

Marketers grow by learning faster than competitors. Experimentation is becoming a core operating capability.

High frequency testing requires agile platforms that can support fast in-store experiments using verified sales data. These platforms increase the number of tests organizations can run, improve rigor, and create standardized learning frameworks across teams.

### Four actions to take now

- Begin with high-impact and easy-to-execute tests such as packaging, pricing, and shelf communication.
- Build a cross-functional culture that values rapid and directional learning.
- Use geographic differences to improve test accuracy and scale decisions with confidence.
- Build planned published tests to optimize ad spend effectively to capture bottom of the funnel sales lift

Experimentation improves decision quality and reduces risk. The marketers who operationalize testing across pricing, packaging, shelf innovation, and activation will shape category growth in 2026 and beyond.



## Appendix:

1. <https://www.circana.com/post/navigating-a-triple-squeeze-finding-growth-in-an-uncertain-economy>
2. <https://www.circana.com/post/circana-report-reveals-shifting-generational-tides-in-consumer-spending>
3. <https://www.circana.com/post/female-shoppers-are-slowing-discretionary-purchasing-at-a-faster-rate-than-men-reports-circana>
4. <https://www.circana.com/post/navigating-snap-changes-what-cpg-leaders-need-to-know>
5. **Circana ShopperSights™ combines rich household data and lifestyle segmentation to identify high-opportunity shoppers, understand their preferences, and optimize how to reach them. It offers a comprehensive view of who your most valuable customers are, where to find them, and how to drive conversion. This enables smarter targeting, better distribution, and more effective retail strategies.**
6. <https://www.circana.com/post/sustainability-in-cpg-retailers-are-key-to-growth>
7. <https://www.circana.com/post/retail-and-brand-strategies-for-reaching-hispanic-food-and-beverage-shoppers>
8. <https://www.circana.com/post/how-to-do-market-research-before-developing-or-launching-new-products>
9. <https://www.circana.com/post/store-brands-spotlight-consumer-resilience-private-brand-growth-and-the-protein-boom>
10. **New Product Pacesetters Shaping the 2024 CPG Landscape | Circana**

---

### About Us

Circana is the leading advisor on the complexity of consumer behavior. Through unparalleled technology, advanced analytics, cross-industry data, and deep expertise, we provide clarity that helps almost 7,000 of the world's leading brands and retailers take action and unlock business growth. We understand more about the complete consumer, the complete store, and the complete wallet so our clients can go beyond the data to apply insights, ignite innovation, meet consumer demand, and outpace the competition.

**For more information, visit [circana.com](https://www.circana.com).**

**Follow us on Twitter: [@WeAreCircana](https://twitter.com/WeAreCircana).**

