

How Much Should You Actually Spend on Ads?

The Paid Ads Foundation Map

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Before we get into it

This guide is for e-commerce founders deciding what they can responsibly put into paid ads. If you're starting out or spending under US$5,000 a month on media, use it to check your margins, choose what you can afford to test and work out what needs fixing before you spend more. If you're ready to spend US$5,000 or more a month, start with the same checks before deciding where the money should go.

Maybe you're being told to increase budget, launch more creative, broaden targeting, trust the algorithm, or do all of it at once, and you're trying to figure out what actually applies to your business. This map is going to show you what I look at before I tell a founder to put another dollar behind Meta + Google, because sometimes the ad account is the problem, and sometimes it's the last place I'd start.

You're ready to spend more on ads, which usually means the first question is something like, "Okay, how much should we put into Meta?" or "If I want to make $50K next month, what should my ad budget be?"

And I get why that's the question, but it's almost never where my brain starts.

Before I decide how much money I'm comfortable putting into an ad account, I want to know what that money is being sent into. I want to know your average order value, your conversion rate, your margins, what people are already buying, how often they come back, what your post-purchase experience looks like, where your sales are currently coming from, whether your

tracking is trustworthy, what your customers are saying in reviews, and whether the brand itself gives me enough to work with creatively.

Basically, I want to know whether there is something worth amplifying before we start pouring fuel on it.

That sounds obvious, but I've opened enough accounts to know how often paid media gets blamed for problems that actually started somewhere else in the business. The ads can be perfectly capable of creating interest while the website loses the sale, the product page gives people no reason to trust you, email does absolutely nothing after the click, or the economics were never going to support the CPA in the first place.

So if you're thinking about starting paid media, or you're already running it and wondering whether you're ready to scale, this is the board I want to see first.

1. First, does the math actually work?

If you tell me you want to make $50K and you only want to spend $3K, I'm going to ask what the business has historically been able to produce from $3K, because there has to be some relationship between the goal and the math underneath it.

If your average front-end ROAS is around 3x, we cannot build a plan around $3K magically creating $50K in revenue. That doesn't mean the business can never get there, it just means we need to understand what has to change between where you are now and where you want to go.

I'm looking at AOV, conversion rate, CPA or CAC, margins, historical ROAS, break-even acquisition cost, repeat purchase behaviour and, over time, lifetime value. I want the front-end numbers because they tell me whether that first transaction makes sense, but I also want the backend numbers because the first purchase is not always the whole customer story.

That distinction matters a lot. A customer who buys one £30 pair of earrings and never comes back is one thing. A customer who starts with one pair, loves the quality, comes back to build a stack and eventually spends £150 is another. The amount I can responsibly pay to acquire those two customers is not the same.

This is why I don't worship one ROAS number in isolation. I want to understand what the customer costs today and what they become worth after they enter the business.



2. Is there actually a viable product here?

Before I push more traffic toward anything, I want to see what people are already voting for with their money. What are they buying without paid media forcing the issue? Is there a hero product? Are people coming back? Are there products that look exciting internally but customers keep ignoring?

Reviews are a huge part of this for me, and I don't only mean your own reviews. Your customer reviews tell me what people value after they buy, while your competitors' reviews can tell me what the market still wants and isn't getting.

If I'm working with a jewelry brand and competitor reviews keep saying the plating wears off too quickly, while our product is plated much more heavily, that is not just product information sitting on a website somewhere. That's positioning. That's creative. That's a comparison angle. That gives me something specific to test.

The same thing happens when customers repeatedly describe a feeling, an objection they had before buying, something that surprised them, or the reason they chose you over another option. I'm listening for the language they use because your customers are often handing you the ad copy without realizing it.

That is where Push Their Buttons™ actually starts for me. I'm not sitting down with a blank Canva file asking what hook sounds clever today. I'm looking for the desire, objection, identity, status, proof, urgency or tension that is already making this person care.

3. Does the brand give me a real reason to choose you?

This is where I get a little picky, because a viable product and a memorable brand are not automatically the same thing.

I want a founder story, a point of view, values, proof, language that feels like it belongs to you, and some kind of answer to the question, “Why would I choose this one when I have twenty other tabs open?”

I learned this early in my career working inside a successful ethical jewelry brand, where the question was constantly, “Why?” Why does the company exist? Why are the materials chosen this way? Why should the customer care? Why does this product deserve to exist beside every other engagement ring on the internet?

When the answer is something tangible, like ethically sourced stones, recycled gold, local craftsmanship, a founder who is genuinely front-facing, and a beautiful visual world that supports all of it, suddenly there are a lot of buttons I can push. I can sell the values, the craftsmanship, the identity, the emotional significance of the purchase, the contrast with less ethical alternatives, the quality and the feeling of knowing exactly what you’re wearing.

Compare that to “jewelry that moves with you.”

What am I supposed to do with that?

And yes, visuals matter here too. If you sell jewelry, I want to see the diamonds and gemstones up close. If you sell clothing, I want to see the fit on a real body. If you sell makeup, show me the end result. If everything is obviously AI-generated, especially in a category where quality and trust are highly visual, the brand starts losing integrity before the customer has even clicked.

It has to feel real. It has to feel honest. It has to feel like there are actual people behind the thing you’re asking someone to spend money on.

4. What happens after they click?

This is where founders can get themselves into trouble because they see one ad metric move and immediately decide the campaign is broken.

If I have a high click-through rate and a low conversion rate, for example, my first thought usually isn’t “the ad is bad.” The ad got the click. People were interested enough to leave the platform, so now I want to know what happened when they landed.

Did the page match what the ad promised? Was the website slow? Was the product page thin? Were there reviews? Was there enough proof or urgency? Did the imagery still look as good as it did in the ad? Was the offer clear? Did the site suddenly feel like a completely different brand?

On the other hand, if CTR is weak but the people who do reach the website convert really well, that’s actually encouraging. The offer may be strong and the site may be doing its job, which means I probably need to work harder on the front-end messaging and creative to earn more of the right clicks.

Same symptoms, different diagnosis, which is exactly why I don't like universal rules like "a CTR below X means your campaign is bad." Metrics are clues. I care about what they are telling me in context.

And this is also why your social media matters more than people sometimes want to admit. Someone sees the ad, checks your profile, watches Stories, reads reviews, searches your name, looks at TikTok or Reddit, forgets about you, comes back later, binges again, joins the list, and maybe buys after another touchpoint. Your Instagram grid is part of the landing experience now, whether or not Ads Manager gives it credit.

If your paid creative is polished but your feed is generic AI copy, nobody is on Stories, the Highlights are dead and the whole brand feels like it was assembled cheaply, that trust gap matters.

5. What happens if they don't buy the first time?

I do not want to pay Meta or Google to reacquire the same person forever because the rest of the business has no follow-up system.

If someone visits, adds to cart, starts checkout, joins the email list or buys once, I want to know what happens next. Are there abandonment flows? Is there nurture? Is there a post-purchase sequence? Are you educating people, cross-selling, reminding them to replenish, giving them a reason to come back, or creating a subscription opportunity if the product supports one?

This becomes especially important when front-end profitability is tight, because sometimes the smartest lever is not squeezing another few dollars out of CPA, it's increasing what the customer becomes worth once we acquire them.

I've seen this with a pet wellness business where front-end ROAS was around 1.1, which on its own did not feel especially exciting. We introduced a subscription offer with 30% off the first subscription and started getting recurring customers, which changed the economics because the first order was no longer the end of the value calculation.

That's why I care about post-purchase before I tell someone to scale. If the business has spent all of its energy getting the first purchase and absolutely none of it making the second one easier, there is usually money sitting there that we do not need to buy again through an ad platform.



6. If CPA feels too high, are we sure CPA is the lever?

This is one of my favourite examples of why I look at the whole board before I decide what needs fixing.

For one jewelry client, the obvious conversation could have been, “CPA is too high relative to the first order, so let’s keep pushing until we get CPA down.” Instead, we looked at how customers were buying and changed the offer structure so spending more became more attractive.

During the Black Friday period, AOV increased 25% to £66.93, sales increased 72%, orders increased 35%, and conversion rate increased 34%.

That is what I mean when I talk about making The Right Move. We did not need to obsess over making each customer cheaper if we could make the transaction more valuable and still give the customer something they genuinely wanted.

That might mean bundles, tiered offers, quantity incentives, subscriptions, upsells, better merchandising, prioritizing a stronger hero product or improving the post-purchase path. Sometimes it means changing the website or the message. Sometimes it means fixing lead quality rather than chasing more leads.

And sometimes a perfectly reasonable hypothesis fails. I’ve increased a shipping threshold before thinking it might increase AOV, and it tanked conversion instead. Fine. We had an answer, we reversed it, and we moved on.

Good testing is not about proving that every idea I have is right. It's about getting enough evidence to know what deserves the next move.



7. Can I trust the tracking enough to make a decision?

This is the boring part that I am never going to skip, because I've seen too many businesses make very expensive decisions from numbers that were incomplete or simply wrong.

Before scaling, I want to know that purchase events are firing correctly, lead events mean what we think they mean, UTMs are in place, Meta Pixel and Conversions API are healthy, Google conversion tracking is set up properly, and we have some way of comparing what the platforms report against backend reality through Shopify, GA4, a CRM, Triple Whale or another reliable source.

If Meta says one thing, Google says another and the backend says something completely different, I don't want to pick whichever dashboard makes us feel best and scale from there. I want to understand the gap.

The same goes for lead generation. A campaign can produce cheap leads all day and still be commercially terrible if none of those people close. I want to know who the sales team is actually turning into customers, what those buyers have in common, whether certain locations or keywords are producing garbage, and whether we can feed cleaner signals back into the campaigns through exclusions, negative keywords, better qualification or higher-quality lookalikes.

If I don't have backend visibility, I can't do that work properly, which is also why Silver Platter Ads™ will not take on an account where the business refuses to give us enough access to see what is actually happening after the click.

I don’t scale confusion.

8. Meta and Google need jobs, not equal budgets

At Wildelore, a Mother’s Day campaign was putting most of its spend into video while the graphics barely delivered. Instead of buying more creative, we warmed audiences first and gave the ads a different job at each stage. Reported campaign ROAS moved from 5.79× to 8× after the restructure. I’d rather see what the existing budget can do with clearer jobs than put more money into the same setup.

Another thing I want to understand before we scale is what each channel is actually supposed to be doing, because Meta and Google frequently participate in the same purchase without doing the same job.

Meta might introduce the brand. Search might capture someone who remembers the product but not where they saw it. PMax might support product discovery and retargeting. Email might close them a week later. Organic content might create the trust that makes the final Google search convert.

So when someone asks me, “Should Meta or Google get more budget?” my answer is genuinely that it depends on what the data is telling us.

On Google I’m looking at branded versus non-branded intent, search terms, negatives, phrase and exact match behaviour, which products are actually receiving spend, whether hero products have enough priority, PMax structure, asset performance, sitelinks, conversion tracking and whether we’re paying for traffic we should never have bought in the first place.

Branded Search is not automatically necessary either. If the brand has strong SEO and owns its name cleanly, I may not need to pay for every branded click. If the company is called something like Woodpecker and Google has to decide whether the person wants a winter coat or information about an actual bird, then yes, I probably want branded Search around the commercial terms.

I also use one channel to learn for another. If a sitelink headline starts outperforming everything else, I want to know why, because that message may belong in a Meta ad. If one organic Reel keeps getting saves and DMs, I may amplify that instead of inventing something from scratch. If Search terms reveal a demand pattern we weren’t talking about, that might change the creative strategy.

Every channel is giving me customer research, not just attribution.

9. Creative strategy depends on how the customer buys

This is where I'm probably going to disappoint anyone looking for a neat little answer like "you need five UGC videos, three statics and two carousels every month," because I don't believe every business needs the same creative mix.

For a makeup brand, I probably want the finished look front and center and the products easy to shop. For a jewelry brand, I may want beautiful close-ups, quality comparisons, styling and the reasons the product is materially different from competitors. For a legal-tech brand, I probably want more founder or talking-head content because you're asking someone to buy an important legal document from a company they may have never heard of before, so trust has a completely different job to do.

Some brands are selling functionality. Some are selling identity. Some are selling trust. Some are selling a feeling so specific that the creative has to make you want to enter the world of the brand before you even care about the individual product.

That is why "make more creatives" is not a strategy by itself. I want to know what hypothesis we are testing, what buying trigger we are trying to prove, what stage of the journey this person is in and what we have already learned from paid and organic behaviour.

And no, I do not automatically launch 20 creatives because the internet decided Andromeda requires it. If the budget cannot give 20 concepts enough delivery to learn anything meaningful, we are just spreading the money thin and calling it testing.

I would much rather test a manageable number of meaningfully different ideas, let them collect enough signal, look at the actual purchase behaviour and then decide what deserves iteration.

10. So, are you actually ready to scale?

By the time I get here, I'm not asking whether the founder has money available to spend, I'm asking whether the business has enough of the system working that more traffic has somewhere productive to go.

If acquisition is already unprofitable relative to the margins, email infrastructure barely exists, tracking is shaky, the website is slow, the product page has no proof, the photography is weak, the social presence is dead, the brand sounds like generic AI, nobody knows what customers are worth and we have no backend visibility, I am probably not going to tell you to double the budget just because you are ready to grow.

We may need to fix the site first. We may need to increase AOV, build post-purchase, improve the creative, create better founder content, clean up tracking, prioritize a hero product, change the Google structure, improve lead qualification or simply give the existing campaigns more time before making another move.

This is also where expectations matter. The first 30 days are not a guarantee that $5K suddenly becomes $20K. I'm auditing the account, setting up tracking, looking at audience structure, custom audiences, demographics, search volume, keywords, creative, copy, landing pages, existing winners and the buying triggers that seem to matter. Then we build hypotheses, launch, compare the front-end signals with the backend numbers and keep learning.

Honestly, I'm still learning through the first 90 days. By then, I want much stronger clarity around what customers respond to, which products deserve more budget, what messages are creating purchases, what the business can actually afford to pay for acquisition, and which channel is doing which job.

And yes, I will find something out whether we like the answer or not.

Maybe we find a scalable winner. Maybe we find out the offer needs work. Maybe the site is the bottleneck. Maybe the founder needs to become much more visible. Maybe paid media is doing its job and the sales team is dropping every lead after the form submission.

All of that is useful information, because now we can stop guessing.

Before you spend more, ask yourself this

Do I know my AOV, conversion rate, margins, CPA and break-even acquisition cost? Do I know what a customer becomes worth after the first purchase? Do I know which products people already want, what my reviews are telling me and what my competitors' reviews reveal? Is there a clear reason to choose this brand, or are we saying the same thing as everyone else? Does the website actually support the promise in the ads? Is email doing anything with the traffic we already paid for? Can I trust my tracking? Do I know what Meta is creating versus what Google is capturing? Is organic content helping build trust? And if performance is weak, do I know where the constraint actually lives?

If you can answer those questions, now I'm much more interested in talking about scale.

If you can't, that's where I'd start.

Because paid media is only one part of the board, and the best media buying is not about pressing more buttons inside Ads Manager. It's about understanding the business well enough to know which move actually matters next.

That is what I want you to take from this map.



A quick hello from me

Hi, I'm Ana Steiu, founder of Silver Platter Ads™. I've spent the last eight years in marketing, worked across 100+ brands, managed $7–8M+ in paid media and helped generate tens of millions in client revenue across Meta + Google.

The part of that experience that matters most here is that I've opened enough accounts to know how often the obvious diagnosis is wrong. I started in-house, eventually became a Director of Marketing, and that background trained me to look beyond Ads Manager at the offer, the website, the customer journey, the economics, the creative, email, retention and what happens after somebody clicks.

That's the lens behind this resource, and it's also how I lead Silver Platter Ads™ now: data first, then gut, look at the whole board, diagnose the real constraint, then make the move that actually matters.

If you're ready to spend US$5,000 or more a month on paid media and want someone to work through these decisions with you, The Right Move™ is my one-time paid ads audit.

Ask me about The Right Move™ Audit

High standards on my side, a whole lot less on your plate. 🥂