

Destination Marketing

The Complete Guide to 2026 Channels

A practical channel guide for destination marketers navigating accountability, AI discovery, and integrated campaign performance.



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Contents

Use the links below to jump directly to each chapter.

[Why Your Destination Marketing Strategy Needs to Evolve in 2026](#)

[Social Media in Destination Marketing: Still the Most Powerful Channel for Travel Inspiration](#)

[Video in Destination Marketing: Dominating the Path from Dreaming to Booking](#)

[Influencer Marketing Has Become a Core Channel for Destination Marketers in 2026](#)

[User-Generated Content: The Authenticity Multiplier](#)

[Search Marketing Continues to Capture High-Intent Travellers, But the Rules Have Changed](#)

[Email Marketing Quietly Delivers the Highest ROI in Travel](#)

[Programmatic Advertising: Scale Is No Longer the Story](#)

[Offline Channels Still Multiply Digital Campaign Impact](#)

[The Future of Destination Marketing: Integration Is Everything](#)

About the author



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About Digital Dialog

Digital Dialog is an AI consultancy with deep expertise in travel, tourism and hospitality.

We help tourism boards, hospitality groups, travel businesses, and membership organisations make confident decisions about AI — from understanding the landscape and choosing the right tools, to developing practical implementation plans.

Our work includes strategic advisory for leadership teams navigating AI adoption, hands-on AI training for teams and professionals, and comprehensive AI resources for membership organisations supporting their stakeholders.

Founded in 2011, we bring over 15 years of experience working with travel, tourism and hospitality clients including Switzerland Tourism, British Airways, Eurostar, Tourism Ireland, and Experience Oxfordshire. That deep sector knowledge means we understand the realities of hospitality operations, the complexity of destination marketing, and the specific challenges of the travel industry — not just the technology.

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Why Your Destination Marketing Strategy Needs to Evolve in 2026

Destination marketing in 2026 is defined by a decisive shift from adoption to accountability. After years of growing digital budgets, the industry's focus has moved to proving that investment delivers real results. 72% of DMOs now cite conversion, ROI metrics, and economic impact data as their most important proof points for stakeholders, according to Sojern's State of Destination Marketing 2026 report — signalling that measuring economic impact has overtaken visitation and engagement as the top strategic priority for destination marketers worldwide.

The landscape continues to evolve rapidly. Paid social remains the most widely used digital channel, with 88% of DMOs investing globally. Instagram and Facebook anchor social strategies at 97% and 90% adoption respectively, whilst YouTube has grown to 55%, reflecting its role across both inspiration and consideration stages. Meanwhile, channel strategies are becoming sharply more selective — display advertising usage fell from 75% to 45% year-on-year, and TikTok adoption among DMOs dropped from 49% to just 28%, as destinations prioritise channels that more clearly support measurable performance.

Yet despite this shift toward accountability, only 9% of DMOs describe their advertising personalisation as “advanced”, revealing a significant gap between ambition and execution. This creates a critical challenge: how do you allocate limited budgets across multiple channels whilst demonstrating tangible economic returns?

The answer lies in understanding which channels and tactics actually drive measurable outcomes — not just reach or engagement, but genuine visitation and tourism revenue. The most successful destinations in 2026 aren't necessarily those using the most channels, but those mastering the fundamentals across proven platforms before chasing the latest trends.

The most striking shift in 2026 is where DMOs are focusing their efforts. DMOs are now evenly split between stage-specific campaigns (47%) and full-funnel strategies (47%), but the real story lies in what they're deprioritising: awareness-focused campaigns have dropped from 59% in 2025 to just 25% in 2026, as destinations redirect spend toward mid- and lower-funnel activity that drives measurable conversions. But here's what I've observed working with destinations across the UK: while the data shows a rush toward performance, most DMOs still allocate only 10-15% of their annual budget to sustained activity. The majority of spending still goes to seasonal campaign bursts.

This creates a fundamental disconnect between strategy and execution. DMOs develop detailed year-round content calendars, then starve them of budget whilst pouring 80% of their resources into summer or winter pushes. The destinations actually succeeding aren't just chasing lower-funnel conversions — they're properly funding sustained, always-on activity that builds the brand recognition needed to make those conversions possible. The sharp decline in awareness investment is a risk worth flagging: short-term performance gains may come at the cost of long-term destination salience.

Multichannel campaigns have become the norm, with marketers balancing limited resources whilst trying to engage travellers at every stage of the journey. Often it's not lack of understanding that prevents integration, it's funding reality. Even savvy DMOs can get forced into fragmented campaigns when budgets arrive in seasonal chunks rather than consistent monthly allocations.

Rather than simply listing the 'best channels' to use, this guide evaluates how every major marketing channel performs in 2026's landscape. We examine what's delivering exceptional results, what's providing steady returns, and crucially — what's no longer worth your time and budget.

From social media and programmatic advertising to AI-powered search and Generative Engine Optimisation, email marketing and offline channels, each section reveals current performance data, real campaign results, and proven implementation strategies. You'll discover not just which channels work, but why they work, how to execute them effectively, and when to avoid them entirely.

So let's dive in!

Social Media in Destination Marketing: Still the Most Powerful Channel for Travel Inspiration

The numbers don't lie: paid social remains the most widely used digital channel in destination marketing, with 88% of DMOs investing globally. Instagram and Facebook continue to anchor social strategies at 97% and 90% adoption respectively, whilst YouTube has grown to 55% as its cross-funnel role strengthens. But the real story isn't about platform adoption — it's about how dramatically social media has transformed the travel planning process itself, and how DMOs are becoming far more selective about where they invest.

77% of travellers consult at least one social media platform when planning a trip, whilst 75% have been inspired to visit a destination after seeing it on social media. This represents a seismic shift from just a decade ago, when search engines and guidebooks dominated travel research. Today, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook serve as modern "travel brochures," with social media actually overtaking traditional search as the leading source of travel inspiration for many demographics.

90% of Gen Z and 80% of Millennials use social media for travel inspiration, making these platforms essential for destinations targeting younger travellers. The implications for destination marketers are profound.

But 2026 has also brought a sharp correction in channel strategy. TikTok adoption among DMOs has dropped from 49% to just 28% year-on-year, and display advertising fell from 75% to 45%, according to Sojern's 2026 report. This doesn't mean these channels are irrelevant — it signals that destinations are prioritising platforms where performance can be clearly measured and attributed. Social platforms aren't just another marketing channel, they're the primary gateway through which travel dreams begin. The question in 2026 is no longer whether to use social media, but which platforms genuinely earn their place in your budget.

Platform-Specific Strategies That Actually Work for Destination Marketing

The biggest mistake DMOs make is treating all social platforms identically. Each platform serves different purposes in the traveller journey and requires distinct approaches that align with user behaviour and platform algorithms.

Instagram: The Visual Storytelling Powerhouse

Instagram remains the dominant platform for destination marketing, but success requires moving beyond beautiful landscape photography. The platform's algorithm now favours authentic, engaging content that sparks genuine interaction rather than passive viewing.

What works: Behind-the-scenes content featuring locals, Stories that showcase real-time destination experiences, and Reels that capture authentic moments rather than polished promotional videos. User-generated content reshares consistently outperform branded content for engagement and reach.

- What doesn't: Generic sunset photos, overly branded content, and static carousel posts without compelling narratives that encourage interaction.

Tourism Ireland's approach exemplifies this strategy, [Their content](#) focuses on real visitor experiences and authentic local interactions rather than promotional messaging, resulting in higher engagement rates and organic reach.

TikTok: Viral Potential, But Declining DMO Investment

TikTok's potential for destination marketing lies in its viral nature and younger demographic reach. The platform rewards authentic, entertaining content that feels native to TikTok's environment rather than repurposed traditional marketing content. However, DMO adoption of TikTok has dropped sharply from 49% to just 28% in 2026, according to Sojern, as destinations shift budgets toward channels with clearer performance attribution.

This doesn't mean TikTok is irrelevant — it means DMOs are being more strategic about when and how they use it. For destinations targeting Gen Z travellers or those with strong organic content capabilities, TikTok can still deliver outsized reach at minimal cost. The key is treating it as an organic opportunity rather than a paid media priority.

VisitScotland demonstrates what's still possible: [their video about an enchanted forest light show](#) gained nearly 800,000 views by cleverly editing existing footage to align with trending audio and keyword searches. The success came from adapting to platform culture rather than forcing destination content into TikTok's ecosystem — and crucially, it cost very little to produce.

Successful TikTok tactics include:

- Trend adaptation: Using popular sounds and hashtags with destination-specific content
- Local personality: Featuring destination residents and their authentic experiences
- Quick storytelling: Condensing destination highlights into engaging 15-60 second narratives
- Educational content: "Things you didn't know about [destination]" consistently performs well

The bottom line: If your team has the capacity to create platform-native content and your audience skews younger, TikTok remains worthwhile as an organic channel. But if you're choosing where to allocate paid media budget, the data suggests Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are delivering more measurable returns for most DMOs in 2026.

YouTube: Long-Form Storytelling and Discovery

YouTube serves a different function in the travel planning process with deeper research and inspiration through longer-form content. Travellers use YouTube to virtually experience destinations before visiting, making it crucial for destinations with complex stories to tell.

Successful YouTube strategies focus on:

Comprehensive destination guides that help with actual trip planning

Local expert interviews that provide insider perspectives

Seasonal content that showcases different destination experiences throughout the year

Virtual tours that let potential visitors explore key attractions in detail

Case Studies: Social Media Success in Action

Tourism Ireland's UGV Integration

Tourism Ireland's 2024 "Wild Atlantic Way" campaign demonstrates comprehensive social media strategy. Celebrating the scenic route's anniversary, they:

Ran social media takeovers featuring past visitors

Prompted memory sharing using hashtags like #FillYourHeartWithIreland

Amplified authentic visitor content across their channels

The campaign succeeded because it tapped into travellers' emotional connections with past experiences, creating organic buzz whilst showcasing relatable, real moments from Ireland's Atlantic coast.

Read more on [how Digital Dialog has helped Tourism Ireland promote the Wild Atlantic Way](#) over several campaigns across European markets.

VisitScotland's Multi-Platform Approach

VisitScotland's social media strategy proves diversified platform effectiveness: one of their top Facebook posts in 2024 was simply a reshare of a visitor's photo—a stag swimming in a loch. This single post:

- Reached 1.7 million people (mostly non-followers)
- Generated over 8,000 shares
- Cost nothing beyond social media management time

The success factors were timing, authentic emotion, and content that felt genuinely shareable rather than promotional.

Video in Destination Marketing: Dominating the Path from Dreaming to Booking

Video has evolved from a nice-to-have marketing asset to the dominant format driving travel decisions. According to Sojern's State of Destination Marketing 2026 report, 55% of DMOs now invest in YouTube, making it the third most-used platform behind Instagram (97%) and Facebook (90%). Short-form video leads content strategy, with 76% of DMOs investing in it as the format easiest to consume, share, and adapt across platforms. Meanwhile, Connected TV holds its ground: 58% of DMOs say CTV is somewhat to critically important within their overall media mix, even as channel strategies become more selective elsewhere.

The transformation is profound. Where static images once sufficed for destination promotion, modern travellers expect dynamic, engaging video content that helps them virtually experience destinations before visiting. The creative storytelling possible with video can evoke emotion and wanderlust in ways static images simply cannot match.

Short-form video consistently dominates engagement across all platforms. Instagram Reels, TikTok videos, and YouTube Shorts outperform static content for reach, engagement rates, and sharing behaviour, making video content essential for destinations competing for traveller attention.

The Video Content Hierarchy: Matching Format to Function

Not all video content serves the same purpose in destination marketing. The most successful DMOs develop comprehensive video strategies that deploy different formats strategically throughout the traveller journey.

Short-Form Video: The Attention Capturer

Short-form video consistently dominates engagement across all platforms. Instagram Reels, TikTok videos, and YouTube Shorts outperform static content for reach, engagement rates, and sharing behaviour.

Platform-specific optimisation remains crucial:

- Instagram Reels (15-90 seconds): Focus on visually striking destination moments with trending audio. Success comes from content that feels authentic rather than overly produced.

TikTok Videos (15-60 seconds): Educational content performs exceptionally well—"Things you didn't know about [destination]" or "Hidden gems in [location]" consistently generate high engagement.

- YouTube Shorts (under 60 seconds): Quick destination tips, behind-the-scenes moments, and rapid-fire attraction highlights that encourage viewers to explore longer-form content.

Long-Form Video: The Deep Dive

YouTube remains the dominant platform for long-form travel content, with travellers using the platform for virtual destination exploration and detailed trip research. Successful long-form strategies include:

- Comprehensive destination guides: 5-15 minute videos that showcase multiple attractions, local culture, and practical travel information
- Seasonal showcases: Content that demonstrates destinations across different times of year, encouraging year-round visitation
- Local expert interviews: Authentic perspectives from destination residents that provide insider knowledge and cultural context

Cinematic Storytelling: The Emotional Hook

High-production cinematic content serves brand building and aspiration creation. These videos might not generate immediate bookings but build long-term destination desirability and brand recognition.

VisitBritain's "Starring GREAT Britain" film exemplifies this approach perfectly. This 2-minute cinematic advertisement, directed by an Academy Award-winning director, stitches together iconic scenes from blockbusters like Mission: Impossible, Harry Potter, and Bridgerton—all filmed in Britain—to portray the UK as one epic film set. The campaign smartly capitalises on screen tourism, knowing that over 90% of surveyed potential visitors to the UK want to visit film and TV locations during their trip.

Performance Data That Proves Video Works

Tourism Ireland's "Wild Atlantic Way" campaign generated over 1.7 million combined video views, proving that authentic visitor experiences captured on video resonate strongly with potential travellers. Their approach combined social media takeovers featuring past visitors, targeted video advertisements highlighting scenic attractions, and user-generated video encouragement using campaign hashtags.

Platform-specific performance varies significantly: well-optimised short-form clips can attract hundreds of thousands of views when timed with trending audio and cultural moments, whereas longer guides sustain viewer attention and drive travel planning.

Cross-channel integration amplifies results: VisitBritain's "Starring GREAT Britain" campaign extends far beyond the hero film itself. The campaign includes platform-specific social media cuts, Connected TV advertising, cinema placements, and digital billboard integration across multiple countries. This multi-format approach creates content once and adapts it strategically across touchpoints.

What Makes Video Content Actually Work

The most successful destination video strategies focus on three key principles:

Platform-native creation over repurposing: VisitScotland's TikTok success came from creating content specifically for the platform's culture and algorithm, using trending sounds and hashtags relevant to destination content, rather than forcing traditional marketing content into TikTok's ecosystem.

Authentic storytelling over promotional messaging: Tourism Ireland's campaign succeeded because it featured real visitor experiences and authentic local interactions, creating emotional connections rather than generic destination promotion.

Strategic format deployment: The best campaigns use short-form for initial attention, long-form for detailed research, and cinematic content for emotional brand building—each serving different stages of the traveller journey.

Video content has become essential for destination marketing because it combines emotional engagement with practical information delivery. When integrated effectively across platforms with authentic storytelling and strategic distribution, video marketing transforms destination awareness into trip planning activity and eventual visitation.

Influencer Marketing Has Become a Core Channel for Destination Marketers in 2026

Influencer marketing has evolved from experimental tactic to core destination marketing strategy. It is no longer a standalone initiative that sits on the side of a DMO's media plan. According to the [State of Destination Marketing 2026 report](#), DMOs are now embedding influencer content within audience-first, performance-driven strategies alongside programmatic advertising, Connected TV, and dynamic creative. The channel has earned its seat at the table.

The transformation stems from changing traveller behaviour. Modern travellers trust peer recommendations more than traditional advertising, with influencer content providing the authentic, relatable experiences that inspire travel decisions. Unlike polished tourism board advertisements, influencer content feels genuine and accessible, showing real people experiencing destinations authentically.

The maturation of influencer marketing means destinations can now approach partnerships strategically rather than experimentally. But the goalposts have moved. Economic impact is now the top metric DMOs report against globally, ranking above visitation, engagement, or sentiment, according to Sojern's 2026 research. That means influencer campaigns are increasingly expected to demonstrate bookings, visitor spend, and revenue contribution, not just reach and impressions. Leading DMOs have moved well beyond vanity metrics to focus on campaigns that drive website traffic, email signups, and actual visitation, making influencer marketing an accountable, results-driven channel.

Influencers as a Content Supply Chain Solution

Here's something I've seen increasingly with destinations I work with: the sheer volume of content required in 2026 is overwhelming teams. Content creation has become a top-three digital marketing challenge for DMOs, right behind budget limitations and demonstrating clear ROI, according to Sojern. Personalised marketing demands far more assets than a single campaign team can realistically produce. You need more videos, more ads, more landing pages, and more creative that flexes across platforms and speaks to different traveller interests and personas.

This is where influencer partnerships have quietly become one of the most practical solutions available. Rather than just thinking of influencers as a distribution channel for reaching their audience, smart destinations are treating them as a content creation engine that feeds the wider marketing operation. Extended partnerships generate libraries of authentic photos, videos, and stories that destinations can repurpose across their own social channels, paid campaigns, email marketing, and website content long after the original posts go live.

For smaller DMOs especially, where building a large in-house content production team simply is not feasible, influencer collaborations provide a way to maintain a steady flow of high-quality, authentic content without the overhead. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to keep the content machine running year-round.

Strategic Partnerships Over Transactional Posts

The most effective influencer marketing has evolved from one-off sponsored posts to strategic, long-term partnerships that build authentic relationships between influencers, destinations, and their audiences.

Building Authentic Influencer Relationships

Successful destinations focus on relationship depth rather than reach breadth:

- Long-term ambassador programmes: Rather than single posts, leading DMOs develop ongoing relationships with influencers who become genuine destination advocates over time.
- Authentic experience provision: Instead of scripted itineraries, successful campaigns give influencers freedom to explore destinations naturally and share genuine discoveries.

Mutual value creation: The best partnerships provide value to influencers beyond payment, including exclusive access, unique experiences, or content creation opportunities that enhance their personal brand.

Creative collaboration: Rather than dictating content requirements, smart destinations collaborate with influencers on creative concepts that authentically showcase the destination whilst fitting the influencer's established style and audience expectations.

Moving Beyond Single Campaign Activations

Strategic influencer partnerships extend beyond individual campaigns:

- **Seasonal storytelling:** Long-term influencer partners can showcase destinations across different seasons, weather conditions, and experiences, providing comprehensive destination representation.
- **Audience development:** Ongoing relationships help destinations build audiences over time rather than relying on temporary campaign boosts that disappear after individual posts.

Content asset creation: Extended partnerships generate libraries of authentic content that destinations can use across multiple marketing channels and future campaigns, helping address the content production challenge outlined above.

Micro vs Macro: The Authenticity Advantage

The most significant trend in destination influencer marketing remains the proven effectiveness of micro-influencers over mega-influencers for driving genuine engagement and conversion. And in 2026, with budgets under continued pressure and media costs rising faster than funding, cost efficiency matters more than ever.

Micro-influencers (1,000-100,000 followers) consistently deliver superior results for destination marketing:

Higher engagement rates: Micro-influencer audiences engage more actively with content, leading to better reach and interaction levels compared to mega-influencer posts that often receive passive consumption.

- **Authentic audience relationships:** Smaller influencers maintain genuine connections with their followers, making recommendations feel more trustworthy and personal.
- **Cost effectiveness:** In a budget-constrained environment, micro-influencer partnerships remain financially accessible for most DMO budgets whilst delivering measurable impact.

Data-driven audience matching: This is where things are getting interesting. DMOs are increasingly using AI and behavioural data to match influencer content to specific traveller segments rather than selecting influencers based purely on follower count. The thinking is straightforward: if your destination is targeting culinary travellers, adventure seekers, and family holidaymakers as distinct segments, your influencer partners should map directly to those audiences. Micro-influencers who serve niche travel interests are more valuable than ever precisely because they align with the segment-specific strategies DMOs are now running.

Optimal Influencer Mix Strategy

The most effective approach combines different influencer tiers strategically:

2-3 macro-influencers for broad reach and awareness generation across large audience segments. 8-12 micro-influencers for authentic storytelling and niche audience targeting within specific traveller categories. Long-term ambassador relationships rather than one-off collaborations to build sustained destination advocacy.

This balanced approach maximises both reach and authenticity whilst maintaining budget efficiency and strategic focus. Given the budget pressures facing DMOs in 2026, micro-influencers offer the strongest value proposition for destinations that need to demonstrate ROI from every pound or dollar spent.

Influencer Marketing Meets Co-Op Strategy

Something that was less common even two years ago but is now firmly established: integrating influencer campaigns into co-op marketing programmes. According to Sojern's 2026 data, 80% of DMOs globally are running co-op campaigns, and influencer partnerships are a natural fit within these.

By partnering with airlines, hotel groups, other destinations, or tourism brands on shared influencer activations, DMOs can extend reach whilst sharing costs. The logic works on multiple levels: partnering with established voices builds trust by association, co-op structures unlock budget that might not exist for influencer work alone, and the shared campaign gives each partner credibility from the others.

For smaller DMOs in particular, co-op influencer campaigns provide access to influencer talent and audience scale that would be well beyond their individual budgets. It is a particularly effective approach for lean teams looking to punch above their weight.

Data and Performance from Real Influencer Campaigns

Tourism Northern Ireland's "My Giant Adventure" campaign demonstrates influencer marketing's measurable impact: By inviting 36 carefully chosen travel influencers to experience Northern Ireland and share content, the campaign generated:

431 pieces of content across photos, videos, and blog posts

Over 1.7 million combined video views

50% increase in overnight trips attributed to campaign impact

The campaign's success came from several key factors: Rather than prescriptive itineraries, influencers were given freedom to explore and discover Northern Ireland naturally, creating genuine content. The destination then amplified this authentic content across their own channels, multiplying campaign reach. Many campaign participants became ongoing Northern Ireland advocates, extending campaign impact beyond the initial activation period.

The Measurement Challenge DMOs Must Solve

The data is clear that sophisticated measurement matters: destinations using comprehensive influencer measurement approaches see 40% better ROI than those tracking only basic metrics like reach and impressions. But measurement remains the sector's biggest obstacle.

Here's what I think is the critical challenge for influencer marketing in 2026: attribution. According to Sojern's research, 49% of DMOs globally now say tracking and attribution is their top barrier to managing full-funnel marketing strategies, a sharp increase from 37% the previous year. That problem hits influencer marketing particularly hard because the path from an influencer's Instagram Reel to a hotel booking is rarely a straight line.

For influencer marketing specifically, this means destinations need to move beyond counting impressions and engagement rates. The most effective measurement frameworks connect influencer activity to website traffic, booking referrals, visitor spend data, and ultimately economic impact. DMOs that invest in building these attribution capabilities will not only justify influencer spend more effectively but will also optimise future campaigns based on what actually drives revenue rather than what simply generates likes.

Platform Considerations for 2026

The platform landscape for influencer marketing has consolidated, and this should inform where you focus your influencer partnerships. Instagram remains the dominant channel at 97% DMO usage globally, according to Sojern's 2026 data, making it the default platform for influencer collaborations. YouTube, used by 55% of DMOs, plays an important role for longer-form influencer storytelling, destination guides, and immersive video content.

TikTok's position has shifted notably. DMO usage dropped from 49% in 2025 to 28% in 2026. It is no longer the must-have platform it was positioned as even a year ago. That does not mean TikTok is irrelevant for influencer campaigns, but destinations should approach it selectively rather than treating it as a default requirement. For DMOs working with limited budgets, concentrating influencer activity on Instagram and YouTube, where audiences and infrastructure are most established, is likely to deliver stronger, more measurable returns.

User-Generated Content: The Authenticity Multiplier

Why User-Generated Content is Essential in 2026

User-generated content represents perhaps the most powerful social media tactic for destinations. It costs virtually nothing beyond social media management time yet provides authentic endorsements that paid advertising cannot replicate. In an era where travellers are surrounded by AI-generated and algorithmically assembled content, UGC offers genuine peer recommendations that cut through the noise and drive real booking decisions.

The authenticity advantage has never been more pronounced. Two-thirds of DMOs now use AI to support content creation. As AI-assisted content becomes the norm, travellers are growing more attuned to what feels genuine versus what feels manufactured. When potential visitors see real people sharing unscripted experiences, it creates a level of trust and relatability that neither professional marketing content nor AI-generated copy can replicate. UGC shows destinations through the eyes of actual travellers, providing social proof that no technology can manufacture.

Modern algorithms favour authentic content, meaning UGC often achieves higher organic reach than branded content across social platforms. This creates a powerful multiplier effect where authentic visitor content reaches broader audiences than equivalent marketing spend on promoted posts. It is no surprise, then, that content engagement has surged as a strategic priority for DMOs, jumping from 55% to 70% year-on-year, reinforcing how much the industry now values the kind of genuine interaction that UGC naturally generates.

What's Working in User-Generated Content Strategy

The most effective UGC strategies have evolved beyond simply reposting visitor photos to systematic approaches that encourage, curate, and amplify authentic content at scale.

Strategic Hashtag Campaigns

Leading destinations create specific, memorable hashtags that encourage content creation whilst building searchable content libraries:

- Campaign-specific hashtags: Rather than generic destination names, successful campaigns use unique, shareable tags that connect to specific experiences or emotions.
- Clear content prompts: The best UGC campaigns provide specific suggestions for content creation—"Show us your favourite local meal" or "Capture your best sunset moment"—rather than vague requests for destination photos.
- Seasonal storytelling: Strategic hashtag campaigns align with destination seasons, events, or marketing themes to create focused content bursts that support broader campaign objectives.

Content Amplification Systems

Successful destinations build systematic approaches for discovering, gaining permission, and resharing visitor content:

- Social listening integration: Using tools and processes to monitor destination mentions, location tags, and relevant hashtags to identify high-quality visitor content consistently.
- Permission protocols: Streamlined systems for contacting content creators, gaining usage rights, and acknowledging original creators when resharing content.
- Cross-channel distribution: Amplifying the best UGC across multiple marketing channels—social media, email newsletters, website content, and even paid advertising campaigns.

Quality Curation and Brand Alignment

While UGC provides authenticity, destinations must maintain quality standards that align with brand values:

- Content quality guidelines: Developing criteria for selecting UGC that meets technical standards whilst maintaining authentic feel and genuine emotion.
- Brand consistency balance: Ensuring amplified content reflects destination positioning and values without stifling the natural creativity and authenticity that makes UGC effective.

- **Diverse representation:** Actively seeking and featuring UGC that showcases destination accessibility, inclusivity, and appeal to varied traveller demographics and interests.

UGC in Short-Form Video

The line between UGC and video content has blurred significantly in 2026. With 76% of DMOs now investing in short-form video, visitor-created Reels, TikToks, and Shorts have become one of the most shareable forms of destination content. A 15-second clip of a traveller's genuine reaction to a viewpoint, a local dish, or an unexpected encounter often outperforms polished promotional video in both reach and engagement. Destinations that actively encourage and reshare visitor video content, not just photography, are tapping into the format that platforms currently reward most.

Data and Performance from Real UGC Campaigns

What Makes UGC Actually Work

Tourism Ireland's 2024 "Wild Atlantic Way" campaign demonstrates comprehensive UGC strategy execution: Rather than creating new promotional content, they prompted past visitors to share existing memories and experiences using hashtags like #FillYourHeartWithIreland. They featured past visitors taking over official accounts to share authentic experiences from the Atlantic coast. The campaign succeeded because it tapped into travellers' existing emotional connections with past experiences, generating over 1.7 million combined video views whilst creating organic buzz around the scenic route's anniversary celebration.

VisitScotland's viral UGC success provides concrete performance data: one of their top Facebook posts in 2024 was simply a reshare of a visitor's photo—a stag swimming in a loch. Their social media team identified this visitor's photo that perfectly captured Scotland's natural beauty and wildlife in an authentic, shareable moment. This single UGC post:

- Reached 1.7 million people (mostly non-followers)
- Generated over 8,000 shares
- Cost nothing beyond social media management time

The post generated thousands of comments and shares because it felt like a genuine discovery rather than marketing content, proving UGC's potential for massive organic reach with minimal investment.

The performance differential is significant: authentic visitor content consistently outperforms branded destination content for organic reach, engagement rates, and sharing behaviour across social media platforms.

Successful UGC campaigns demonstrate consistent patterns across different destinations and platforms:

- **Authentic emotion drives sharing:** Content that captures genuine surprise, joy, discovery, or beauty consistently outperforms staged or promotional material.
- **Local personality inclusion:** UGC featuring local people, traditions, or everyday life generates higher engagement than purely landscape or attraction-focused content.
- **Practical value addition:** User-generated content that provides trip planning insights, hidden gem discoveries, or practical travel tips performs better than purely aesthetic content.
- **Community building focus:** The most successful UGC creates conversation and encourages others to share their own experiences rather than simply showcasing individual posts.

Organic social content, particularly UGC, plays a huge role at the early "dreaming" stage of the visitor journey, especially when it's engaging, authentic, and shareable rather than promotional or advertising-focused. As AI-generated summaries increasingly handle the research and planning stages of travel, authentic human content becomes even more critical at the inspiration stage, where emotional connection is what ultimately moves someone from browsing to booking.

Search Marketing Continues to Capture High-Intent Travellers, But the Rules Have Changed

Why Search Marketing Remains Essential in 2026

While social media sparks travel dreams, search marketing intercepts travellers when they're actively planning and ready to make decisions. A large share of travellers still begin trip planning with a search query or consult travel websites, especially for detailed research that goes beyond inspirational content.

In the UK, online search and official travel websites rank among the top planning resources alongside personal recommendations and social media. This positions search engine marketing as a crucial tactic for destination marketers aiming to capture high-intent audiences at the perfect moment.

The difference is intent level: Someone scrolling Instagram might see a beautiful destination photo and think "that looks nice someday." Someone searching "weekend breaks from London" or "family activities in Edinburgh" is actively planning a trip and comparing options. This intent differential makes search marketing the conversion catalyst that turns social media inspiration into actual bookings.

But here's what has changed dramatically: where and how those searches happen. In 2025, Google rolled out AI Overviews globally, and they now appear across a huge proportion of search results. When a traveller searches "best time to visit Scotland," they increasingly get a synthesised AI-generated answer at the top of the page, pulling information from multiple sources and answering the question before a single link is clicked. Research from the Pew Research Center found that click-through rates dropped from 15% to 8% when these AI summaries appeared.

At the same time, travellers are increasingly bypassing Google altogether. Around 40% of travellers globally are now using AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity and Google Gemini for trip planning, with travel and hospitality ranking as the top industry for AI-generated recommendations. According to a Global Hotel Alliance survey, nearly two-thirds of their members have used ChatGPT to plan a trip, rising to almost four-fifths among Gen Z travellers.

This shift is not lost on the industry. According to the State of Destination Marketing 2026 report, 51% of DMOs are either very concerned about generative AI's impact or are actively developing a response strategy. Search engine marketing investment has dipped slightly to 68% globally, suggesting some destinations are already rethinking their approach.

The implication for destination marketers is clear: search marketing is more important than ever, but what "search marketing" means has expanded significantly. It is no longer just about ranking on Google and running search ads. It now encompasses how your destination appears across AI-powered search results, conversational AI platforms, and traditional search listings simultaneously.

SEO That Actually Converts: Stop Thinking Like a Marketer

Think like a traveller, not a destination promoter. The most effective destination SEO targets three distinct search behaviours:

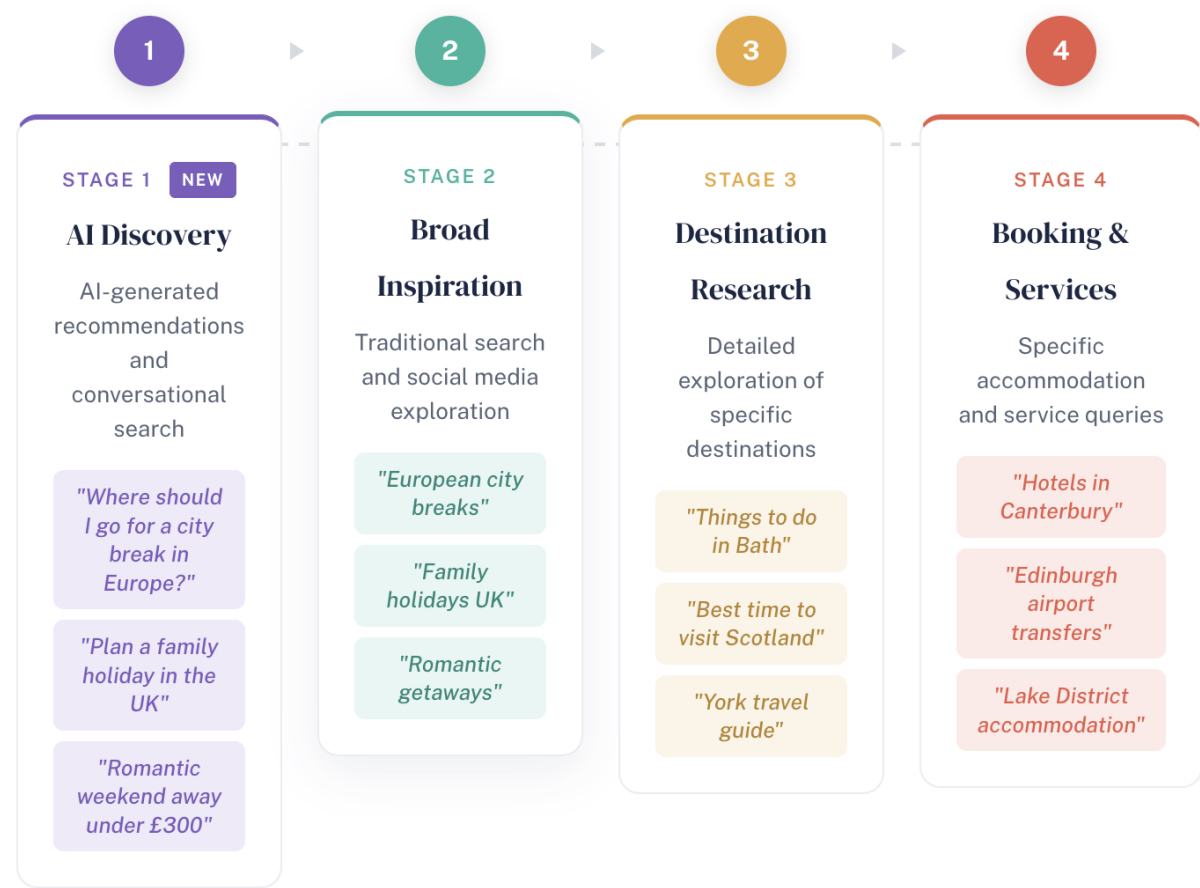
- Dream stage: "Beautiful places to visit in Europe"
- Planning stage: "Weekend breaks from London under £200"
- Booking stage: "York hotels near the Minster"

Most DMOs only optimise for dream-stage searches ("Visit [Destination]") whilst missing the specific, high-intent queries that actually drive bookings. The planning and booking stages are where conversion happens, yet they're often ignored in favour of generic destination promotion.

Successful destination SEO targets all three stages below with appropriate content.

Modern Traveller Search Patterns

How travel searches evolve from AI-powered discovery to booking



KEY INSIGHT

Around 40% of travellers now start their journey with AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity and Google Gemini, often before a single traditional search. Destinations not appearing in these AI-generated recommendations risk being excluded from the consideration set entirely. Travel searches then become increasingly specific as travellers move through the remaining stages, from broad inspiration to targeted service bookings.

Examples of High-Performing Destination Content

- Comprehensive destination guides: "48 Hours in York: A Complete Weekend Itinerary" targets planning-stage searches whilst providing genuine value to visitors.

- Seasonal content: “Christmas Markets in Bath: Your Complete Guide” captures time-sensitive searches and encourages off-peak visitation.
- Activity-focused pages: “Family Activities in the Lake District” targets specific traveller needs rather than generic destination promotion.

VisitBritain’s Screen Tourism hub demonstrates content strategy effectiveness. Part of their “Starring GREAT Britain” campaign, the hub provides themed itineraries based on movie genres (romance, fantasy, action), a digital map of film locations, and travel information for film enthusiasts. This content serves dual purposes: inspiring potential tourists with stories and ideas, and subtly guiding them toward booking by showcasing how to experience those stories in real life.

The Rise of AI Search: AEO, GEO, and What Destination Marketers Need to Know

Traditional SEO remains essential, but two new disciplines have emerged alongside it that destination marketers cannot afford to ignore: Answer Engine Optimisation (AEO) and Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO).

AEO focuses on getting your content featured in AI-powered search features like Google’s AI Overviews, featured snippets and voice assistant responses. It is about structuring content so it can be directly extracted and presented as the answer to a traveller’s query.

GEO focuses on getting your destination cited by large language models like ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity and Gemini when they generate recommendations and itineraries for travellers.

Together with traditional SEO, these three disciplines form the modern search marketing toolkit. As a recent Microsoft study put it: SEO is how you won in traditional search; AEO and GEO are how you win the recommendation in AI-powered discovery.

The good news is that many of the fundamentals overlap. Creating authoritative, well-structured, factually accurate content that genuinely answers traveller questions is the foundation of all three. The Sojern State of Destination Marketing 2026 report shows that forward-thinking DMOs are already adapting:

64% are creating content that directly answers common traveller questions

64% are writing in clear, structured formats that AI tools can easily summarise and share

43% are keeping partner listings and attraction details up to date and easy to scan

31% now see their website as a “source of truth” that AI tools reference when generating answers for travellers

As Visit Denver’s CMO Justin Bresler explains: “What we’ll move into in 2026 is a new content marketing push. We’re trying to understand what the AI engines are looking for and continue to be that trusted source, even if it’s not traffic coming to our website.”

This represents a fundamental mindset shift. Success in search is no longer measured solely by website clicks and rankings. If a traveller asks ChatGPT “Where should I go for a weekend break in Northern England?” and your destination is named in the response, that is visibility, even without a click. If your destination is absent from that response, you may never make it into the traveller’s consideration set at all.

We have put together a comprehensive guide to [AEO and GEO for tourism, travel and hospitality brands](#). In the meantime, the practical starting points for destination marketers are straightforward: create genuinely useful content that answers real traveller questions, structure it clearly, back claims with verifiable facts, and keep your business information accurate across the web. These fundamentals serve SEO, AEO and GEO simultaneously.

Voice Search Optimisation

Voice search is transforming how travellers discover destination information. Someone might ask Siri or Alexa “What are the top things to do in Edinburgh?” expecting immediate, helpful responses.

Voice searches typically use natural, conversational language rather than keyword phrases. Destinations should optimise content to match these patterns by creating FAQ sections and content that directly answers common voice queries, using conversational tone that matches how people actually speak.

VisitScotland benefits from voice search optimisation when their well-structured FAQ or destination information appears in voice assistant responses, effectively providing free promotion through search results.

Paid Search Integration That Amplifies Results

Most DMOs ensure that when someone searches for “[City/Country] vacation” or specific attractions, their official website or campaign landing pages appear at the top of results. Paid search advertising provides immediate visibility whilst long-term SEO efforts build momentum.

The most effective approach coordinates paid search with broader campaign activity. Travel South Dakota’s integrated campaign demonstrates this perfectly: after launching their hero video, they ran targeted search ads and supportive email marketing to capitalise on generated interest. When curious viewers searched online for more information, South Dakota’s targeted search ads and optimised content helped funnel them towards booking. This full-funnel approach, inspiration via social/video, then conversion via search, has become standard practice for sophisticated destination marketing.

It is worth noting that AI Overviews are also reshaping paid search. Research shows that when AI summaries appear alongside search ads, paid click-through rates can drop significantly. However, brands that are cited within AI Overviews see substantially higher click-through rates on both their organic and paid listings compared to those that are not cited. This reinforces why AEO and GEO matter even for destinations investing heavily in paid search: being recognised as an authoritative source by AI systems amplifies the performance of your paid activity too.

Email Marketing Quietly Delivers the Highest ROI in Travel

Why Email Marketing Remains Essential in 2026

While destinations chase the latest social media trends, email marketing continues delivering exceptional results without fanfare. It generates between £36–£42 for every £1 spent according to multiple 2026 industry studies, with retail and ecommerce brands seeing returns as high as £45 per £1 spent on properly segmented campaigns. There's no doubt email has excellent ROI.

Email marketing becomes increasingly important as third-party cookies disappear and privacy regulations tighten. Destinations that build substantial email lists own direct communication channels with interested travellers, independent of platform algorithm changes or advertising cost increases that affect social media reach.

The unique advantage of email lies in its ability to maintain ongoing relationships with potential visitors over extended planning periods. Unlike social media posts that disappear in feeds, email messages land directly in subscriber inboxes and can be saved, forwarded, and referenced throughout the travel planning process.

Modern email strategies have become sophisticated and personalised, increasingly powered by AI, CRM systems, and behavioural data rather than generic newsletter blasts. This evolution transforms email from interruptive marketing into valuable, anticipated communication that subscribers actively engage with.

What's Working in Email Marketing Strategy

The most successful destination email programmes have evolved from broadcast newsletters to sophisticated, behavioural marketing systems that deliver personalised content based on subscriber interests and engagement patterns.

Strategic Segmentation and Personalisation

Leading destinations segment subscribers based on demonstrated interests and past behaviour rather than basic demographics. According to Sojern's State of Destination Marketing 2026 report, DMOs are increasingly leaning away from demographic-only targeting and towards interest-based segmentation. As Justin Bresler, CMO of Visit Denver, notes, interests now drive how his team segments their audiences, with traditional demographics kept in place but no longer leading the strategy.

Travel style segmentation: Separate email streams for adventure seekers, luxury travellers, families, cultural enthusiasts, and budget-conscious visitors, each highlighting relevant destination aspects.

Engagement-based targeting: Different messaging for highly engaged subscribers versus occasional openers, with re-engagement campaigns for inactive subscribers and exclusive content for loyal readers.

Geographic personalisation: Location-based content considering where subscribers live, seasonal differences, and relevant travel distances or flight connections to the destination.

Behavioural triggers: Automated emails based on website behaviour, such as downloading itineraries, viewing specific attractions, or abandoning trip planning tools, ensuring relevant follow-up communications.

Content That Nurtures Travel Dreams

Successful destination emails provide genuine value beyond promotional messages:

- **Seasonal storytelling:** Content that showcases destinations across different times of year, weather conditions, and experiences to encourage year-round visitation rather than peak-season concentration.
- **Insider information:** Local tips, hidden gems, and authentic experiences that subscribers cannot easily find through general destination research or guidebooks.

Practical planning assistance: Itinerary suggestions, transportation guides, accommodation recommendations, and booking tips that help subscribers convert inspiration into actual trip plans.

- **User-generated content integration:** Featuring authentic visitor experiences and stories within email content to add social proof and relatability to destination messaging.

AI Is Transforming Email Marketing at Scale

Perhaps the most significant shift in email marketing since our last guide is the rapid adoption of AI and generative AI tools. According to the Litmus State of Email report, 70% of email marketers expect up to half of their email operations to be AI-driven by the end of 2026, with the use of AI-powered image generation in email increasing by 340% in the past year alone.

For destination marketers, this has practical implications across several areas. AI-powered subject line generators can produce and test dozens of variations in seconds, helping smaller DMO teams compete for attention in crowded inboxes. Send-time optimisation has evolved beyond simple time-zone scheduling; AI now analyses individual subscriber behaviour to identify the moments when each recipient is most likely to engage. Dynamic content personalisation allows a single email template to automatically adapt its copy, imagery, and calls to action for different traveller segments, reducing the content production burden that has historically held back personalisation efforts.

AI-assisted A/B testing is another area gaining ground. Rather than testing a single variable at a time, AI tools can run multivariate tests across subject lines, content blocks, and send times simultaneously, accelerating the learning cycle. Automated emails already generate 320% more revenue than non-automated emails, and AI is making these automation workflows smarter and more responsive to real-time subscriber behaviour.

That said, destinations should approach AI as an accelerator rather than a replacement. The most effective programmes use AI to handle repetitive production tasks while keeping human oversight on brand voice, storytelling quality, and strategic direction.

Data and Performance from Real Email Campaigns

Email outperforms other digital channels for marketers: 41% of marketers say email is their most effective channel, putting it far ahead of both social media and paid search in joint second place (both at 16%). Additionally, 75% of marketers plan on maintaining or increasing their email marketing investment in 2026.

Travel industry email performance shows solid engagement, though how we measure success is evolving. Traditional benchmarks place travel and transportation email open rates around 15–23%, with click-through rates of approximately 1.6%. However, Apple's Mail Privacy Protection (which pre-loads email content regardless of whether the recipient actually opens it) has made open rates an increasingly unreliable standalone metric. In 2026, the industry consensus is shifting towards click-through rate and click-to-open rate as more meaningful indicators of genuine engagement.

Tourism and travel companies are adopting email personalisation, though progress is uneven. While personalised emails with recipient-specific content can achieve 29% higher open rates and 41% higher click-through rates, Sojern's 2026 research reveals that personalisation has actually plateaued for many DMOs. The share describing their efforts as only "basic" grew from 14% to 22% year-on-year, and just 9% have reached an advanced stage. The barrier is not ambition but infrastructure: limited access to clean, unified first-party data, disconnected systems, and small teams struggling to activate the technology they already have.

Email's owned media advantage becomes increasingly valuable: unlike social media platforms where algorithm changes can dramatically reduce organic reach, email delivers messages directly to subscriber inboxes. There are currently 4.73 billion email users worldwide, over half of the world's population, with that figure projected to reach 4.89 billion by 2027.

Strategic Email Automation Success

Leading destinations implement automated email workflows that respond to subscriber behaviour:

Welcome series deployment: New subscribers receive sequences introducing destination highlights, practical planning information, and exclusive content that establishes value and engagement expectations. Welcome emails achieve some of the highest engagement rates across all email types, with open rates reaching as high as 68–80% according to recent benchmarks.

Behavioural trigger implementation: Automated emails respond to specific website actions, such as downloading guides, viewing accommodation pages, or using trip planning tools, with relevant follow-up information.

Seasonal campaign automation: Pre-scheduled email series highlight seasonal attractions, events, and experiences throughout the year, maintaining consistent communication without requiring constant manual campaign creation.

Re-engagement programmes: Automated sequences attempt to re-activate inactive subscribers through special offers, exclusive content, or preference update requests before removing unengaged contacts.

Cross-channel data integration: Email automation systems integrate with website analytics, social media engagement, and campaign performance data to create comprehensive subscriber profiles and targeting strategies. AI is increasingly being used to orchestrate these workflows, adapting the sequence and content dynamically based on real-time subscriber actions rather than following rigid, pre-set paths.

Programmatic Advertising: Scale Is No Longer the Story

Why Destinations Are Refining Their Programmatic Approach in 2026

Programmatic advertising has moved beyond adoption and into a phase of maturity. Globally, around 90% of all digital display ad spend now flows through programmatic channels, and in the US alone, programmatic display spending is expected to exceed \$203 billion in 2026. It is no longer a question of whether to use programmatic; it is the default way digital ads are bought and sold.

For destinations, this dominance is reflected in the numbers. 79% of DMOs worldwide now invest in programmatic advertising, up from 77% the year before, with adoption reaching 86% in North America and 67% in Europe (Sojern, State of Destination Marketing 2026). But the more interesting story in 2026 is not how many destinations are using programmatic. It is how well they are using it.

What's Actually Changing in 2026

The promise of programmatic has always been precision: reaching the right traveller with the right message at the right moment. That promise still holds, but the industry is grappling with significant growing pains.

The personalisation gap is real. Despite programmatic's targeting capabilities, most DMOs are struggling to deliver meaningful personalisation at scale. Only 9% of DMOs globally describe their personalisation efforts as "advanced," whilst the share reporting only "basic" personalisation grew from 14% to 22% year-on-year (Sojern, 2026). The barrier is not a lack of ambition. It is infrastructure: clean first-party data, connected tech stacks, and the team capacity to turn insights into action. This challenge mirrors the broader industry picture, where 40% of US marketers now rely on first-party data as their primary targeting approach (eMarketer), yet many organisations still lack the systems to activate it effectively.

Intent is replacing demographics. The shift from demographic targeting to interest-based and behavioural signals is accelerating across the destination marketing sector. DMOs are increasingly layering travel intent data, psychographic profiling (which more than doubled in Europe in 2026), and past campaign performance insights to find travellers with genuine planning behaviour, rather than relying on broad age-and-income segments. As Visit Denver's CMO Justin Bresler puts it: "We are leaning less into demographics, more into specific interests."

Always-on is becoming the norm. 65% of DMOs now run always-on programmatic campaigns, up from 51% in 2025 (Sojern, 2026). Seasonal campaigns remain part of the mix for destinations with peak-period demand, but the broader shift is towards year-round visibility that meets travellers at every stage of their planning cycle. Ad-hoc campaigns have also surged from 8% to 34%, reflecting a more agile, responsive approach to media buying.

The Efficiency Question Destinations Cannot Ignore

Whilst programmatic adoption is near-universal, efficiency remains a serious industry-wide concern. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) found in 2025 that \$26.8 billion in global programmatic media value is lost annually to inefficiencies, a 34% increase in just two years. Less than half of every programmatic dollar effectively reaches consumers, with waste driven by redundant supply paths, measurement gaps, and low-quality inventory.

For destinations, which often operate with significantly smaller budgets than commercial advertisers, this waste problem is amplified. Every pound or dollar lost to supply chain inefficiency is one that could have reached a potential visitor.

The industry response has been a marked shift towards quality over volume. Private marketplace transactions now account for nearly 88% of all programmatic spend (ANA, 2025), as advertisers seek more controlled, transparent environments. Curated inventory packages are gaining traction, with 41% of marketers citing curated deals as a path to higher ROI (Basis Technologies, 2026). For destination marketers, this means working with partners who can offer transparent supply paths and demonstrable media quality, rather than simply chasing the lowest CPMs on the open exchange.

Emerging Channels Within Programmatic

Connected TV (CTV) is one of the fastest-growing programmatic channels, with its share of programmatic spend reaching 44% in mid-2025 (ANA). Over half of DMOs now view CTV as at least somewhat important. The appeal is clear: CTV combines the emotional impact of television with programmatic's targeting precision. However, CTV also introduces new measurement challenges, and destinations should approach it as a complement to, not a replacement for, proven display and video formats.

Short-form video now accounts for over half of programmatic video ad spending, driven by shifting audience behaviour. Younger travellers in particular use short-form video for discovery and inspiration, compressing the path from initial exposure to active trip planning. Destinations that can produce authentic, compelling short-form content are well positioned to benefit from this shift.

AI-powered contextual targeting has had a major renaissance. With third-party cookie usefulness declining (even after Google reversed its deprecation plans for Chrome), AI models can now analyse content at granular levels to place ads in contextually relevant environments without relying on personal user data. Research suggests 72% of consumers feel that the content surrounding an ad influences their perception (Fluency, 2025), making this approach both privacy-compliant and effective.

What's Working for Destinations in 2026

The most effective destination programmatic strategies in 2026 share several characteristics. They combine always-on presence with the flexibility to respond to real-time opportunities. They prioritise first-party data collection and activation, even where pools are still small. They layer multiple data signals, from travel intent to behavioural and psychographic inputs, rather than defaulting to demographics alone. And they invest in supply chain quality, choosing transparent, curated inventory paths over raw reach.

As Zürich Tourism's Head of Marketing Janine Rupf explains: "Our focus has shifted from one-off awareness spikes to always-on, intent-driven campaigns. It is not just about visibility; it is about reaching the right people at the right time."

Critically, only 7% of DMOs say data delivers its most value during active campaign execution (Sojern, 2026). The vast majority use data for planning and post-campaign analysis. Closing this gap, using real-time data to optimise campaigns as they run, represents the next frontier for destination programmatic.

The Bottom Line

Programmatic in 2026 is no longer about whether to invest. It is about investing wisely. The destinations seeing the strongest returns are those treating programmatic not as a set-and-forget channel, but as a continuously optimised system where data quality, supply chain transparency, and creative relevance matter as much as scale.

Offline Channels Still Multiply Digital Campaign Impact

Why Offline Marketing Remains Essential in 2026

In an increasingly digital world, offline channels might seem outdated — but the data tells a different story. Smart destinations are discovering that offline marketing amplifies their digital campaigns rather than competing with them, creating a multiplier effect that pure digital strategies cannot achieve alone.

Ocean Outdoor's neuroscience research demonstrates that [digital out-of-home \(DOOH\) advertising significantly primes audiences to engage more deeply with brands online](#). Supporting industry research shows that OOH advertising can increase online brand searches by around 33% (Nielsen) and drive up to 30% of viewers to engage with the brand's social media (OAAA/Harris Poll) when effectively integrated with digital campaigns. This isn't theoretical — destinations are actively using offline media to strengthen digital performance.

The case for offline has only grown stronger in 2026. Research from the OAAA shows that 74% of mobile users take action on their phones after seeing a DOOH ad, with 44% searching for the brand, 38% visiting its website, and 30% checking social channels. OOH now generates online activation rates five to six times higher than expected based on spend, outperforming channels like TV, radio, banner ads, print, and even online video (OAAA/Comscore). For destinations navigating fragmented traveller journeys, that kind of cross-channel impact makes offline a genuine performance driver, not just an awareness play.

The resurgence stems from digital fatigue and the need for authentic, memorable experiences. Whilst travellers spend significant time online researching destinations, they still encounter physical advertising in airports, train stations, and city centres during their daily lives. These offline touchpoints create brand recognition that makes digital campaigns more effective when travellers later encounter them online.

What's Working and Why Consider Offline Channels in 2026

The most effective offline strategies in 2026 focus on integration with digital channels rather than operating in isolation. Rather than competing with digital, offline marketing makes digital campaigns more effective through improved brand recognition and credibility transfer.

Programmatic DOOH has transformed outdoor advertising. The biggest shift since 2025 is the maturation of programmatic digital out-of-home. Programmatic DOOH ad spending is projected to reach \$1.22 billion in 2026, growing over 22% year-on-year (StackAdapt). Destinations can now buy OOH inventory alongside their other digital channels through the same demand-side platforms, enabling truly unified omnichannel campaigns. Dynamic Creative Optimisation (DCO) adds another layer of relevance — creative can adapt in real time based on signals like location, weather, language, or time of day. A winter cold snap in a source market, for example, can trigger creative promoting a warm destination getaway. Instead of running static messaging everywhere, destinations can deliver the right inspiration at the right moment.

That said, adoption still has room to grow. Around 59% of marketers still buy OOH inventory only through direct deals (StackAdapt/Ascend2), suggesting that many destinations have yet to unlock the full potential of programmatic buying.

Measurement has caught up with ambition. For years, one of the biggest barriers to offline investment was the difficulty of proving ROI. That gap has largely closed. Advances in location intelligence and attribution modelling now allow marketers to connect OOH exposure to real-world behaviour — tracking visitation uplift, overnight stays, and the broader path to purchase by matching anonymised mobile advertising IDs to campaign exposure. Web and app lift studies can reveal increases in searches, site visits, and bookings, whilst sales and brand lift studies provide insight into revenue impact and shifts in awareness or intent. For destinations under growing pressure to demonstrate economic impact, this measurability makes the case for offline investment far easier to justify.

Out-of-home advertising remains particularly effective when targeting travellers at optimal moments — airport advertising reaches people already in a travel mindset, whilst digital billboards enable dynamic content changes based on weather and seasonality. JCDecaux's global airport programmatic DOOH offering, launched in partnership with VIOOH, now allows destinations to run targeted, dynamic campaigns across programmatic-enabled airports worldwide — reaching travellers at the precise moment they're most receptive.

Print media maintains its credibility advantage: destinations featured in respected travel publications gain authority that influences traveller perception across all subsequent digital touchpoints, making online campaigns more effective. Whilst

travellers increasingly use AI tools and social media for trip planning, the trust premium associated with editorial coverage in established publications continues to translate into stronger digital campaign performance.

Events and experiential marketing are more critical than ever. In 2026, events aren't a supporting act — they're becoming the backbone of how visitors choose where to go, when to go, and how long to stay. With the FIFA World Cup bringing an estimated 1 to 6 million international visitors to North America, the America 250 celebrations, and major stadium tours driving global travel, events are shaping up as one of the most influential drivers of destination visitation. Leading destinations report strong ROI from major travel shows when proper digital follow-up systems are implemented, and the trade show industry more broadly reports significant returns on investment when approached strategically with pre-show, during, and post-show engagement plans.

The always-on shift extends to offline. Just as 65% of DMOs have moved to always-on digital paid media strategies in 2026 (up from 51% in 2025, according to Sojern), the same thinking is shaping offline investment. Rather than limiting OOH to seasonal bursts around peak travel periods, destinations are maintaining year-round presence in key source markets — using programmatic DOOH's flexibility to adjust messaging, creative, and spend in real time based on demand signals.

The transformation across all offline channels lies in digital integration: modern campaigns use QR codes, unique URLs, and social media elements to create immediate pathways from offline exposure to online trip planning, enabling precise attribution and ROI calculation that was previously impossible.

Integration Success in Action

Tourism Western Australia's award-winning campaign exemplifies the power of strategic offline-digital integration in destination marketing. The multi-channel approach featured prominent out-of-home placements across iconic global locations including Piccadilly Lights in London, New York City, Singapore, and Japan, whilst seamlessly connecting audiences to digital touchpoints.

The campaign's integrated design ensured every offline element drove online engagement through strategic digital pathways — custom landing pages, interactive QR codes, and destination-specific social content. This approach delivered remarkable results over 16 months: annual visitor spending increased by approximately 36%, overnight visitors grew from 10.5 million to 10.9 million, and the campaign significantly enhanced Western Australia's appeal amongst both domestic and international travellers.

The cross-channel amplification proved particularly effective, with OOH's inherent trustworthiness — ranked higher than most digital channels by consumers — lending credibility that enhanced subsequent digital campaign performance. The offline presence generated authentic content for social channels whilst creating the foundation of trust that made follow-up digital advertising more impactful.

For destinations seeking to maximise their marketing effectiveness, this case demonstrates how OOH integration creates multiplier effects that digital-only strategies cannot achieve. The key lies in strategic integration — using high-impact offline placements to build awareness and trust, then channelling that momentum into measurable online engagement and, ultimately, destination visitation. When offline and digital channels work in concert, the combined impact significantly exceeds the sum of individual parts.

The Future of Destination Marketing: Integration Is Everything

The destination marketing landscape in 2026 has reached a critical inflection point. After years of platform proliferation, budget fragmentation, and now the rapid emergence of AI across the entire marketing stack, a clear pattern has emerged: the destinations achieving exceptional results aren't necessarily those using the most channels or the newest technology, but those that have mastered the art of strategic integration across proven platforms whilst adapting intelligently to how travellers actually discover and plan trips today.

Throughout this guide, we've examined how every major marketing channel performs in today's environment. From social media's dominance in travel inspiration to email marketing's quiet excellence in ROI delivery, each channel serves a distinct purpose in the traveller journey. Social media sparks dreams, search captures intent (increasingly through AI-powered answers before a single link is clicked), video tells compelling stories across new formats like short-form and Connected TV, influencers provide authentic recommendations, email nurtures long-term relationships, programmatic reaches the right traveller at the right moment, and offline channels build the credibility that amplifies everything else.

Why Integration Matters

The most successful destinations in 2026 understand that modern travellers don't experience marketing channels in isolation. But the journey itself has fundamentally changed. A potential visitor might now first encounter your destination through an AI-generated travel recommendation in ChatGPT or a Google AI Overview, see it reinforced through a friend's Instagram Reel, research activities via conversational search, watch short-form videos across multiple platforms, receive nurturing emails over several months, and finally book after seeing programmatic or offline advertising that reinforces their existing interest. Each touchpoint builds upon the previous one, creating momentum that single-channel strategies simply cannot achieve.

What's new in 2026 is the AI layer sitting across the top of this journey. With 51% of DMOs now concerned about or actively developing strategies for generative AI's impact on discovery, the destinations that will thrive are those ensuring their stories, content, and data are structured to be found, surfaced, and recommended, whether by a human scrolling their phone or an algorithm assembling travel recommendations. This is why we'll be publishing a dedicated guide to AEO and GEO for tourism and hospitality brands, because this shift deserves far more attention than a single section can provide.

The Budget Reality Challenge

Despite widespread understanding of the importance of integration, a fundamental disconnect persists between strategy and execution, and it's getting worse. 61% of DMOs now cite budget as their biggest challenge, up from 51% just a year ago. Content creation has entered the top three digital marketing challenges for the first time, driven by the relentless demand for short-form video, platform-specific assets, and the sheer volume of content needed to support personalised campaigns across multiple channels. Nearly half of all teams say they simply don't have enough in-house support to keep up.

This creates the critical challenge facing destination marketers: developing sophisticated year-round strategies across more channels and formats than ever, then lacking the consistent funding and resource to execute them properly. The majority of spending still flows to seasonal campaign bursts rather than the sustained, always-on activity that actually delivers results.

The solution isn't necessarily larger budgets, but smarter allocation and smarter tools. AI is already helping here, with 66% of DMOs now using AI to support content creation and adoption for data analysis nearly doubling in a single year. Rather than pouring 80% of resources into summer pushes, leading destinations are discovering that sustained, smaller investments across multiple channels throughout the year, supported by AI-assisted content production and real-time campaign optimisation, deliver superior returns to intermittent large spends on individual platforms.

Your Path Forward

The complexity of modern destination marketing can feel overwhelming, but the fundamentals remain surprisingly straightforward. Success in 2026 comes from mastering three core principles:

Strategic Integration: Rather than treating channels as separate entities, design campaigns that flow seamlessly across touchpoints. Use social media to inspire, search and AI discovery to capture intent, email to nurture, video to tell stories

across formats from short-form to CTV, influencers to provide social proof, programmatic to reach the right audience at scale, and offline channels to build credibility. Each element should amplify the others. The destinations winning right now aren't adding more channels; they're connecting the ones they have.

Authentic Storytelling (That AI Can Find): Focus on genuine experiences, real people, and helpful information rather than promotional messaging. Feature actual visitors, showcase local personality, and provide practical value alongside inspiration. Authenticity isn't just morally superior, it performs better across every metric that matters. But in 2026, your authentic content also needs to be structured, accessible, and optimised so that AI-powered search tools can find it, interpret it, and recommend it. If your destination isn't showing up in AI-generated travel answers, you may never make it into the traveller's consideration set.

Economic Impact Over Vanity Metrics: The industry has made a decisive shift. 72% of DMOs now prioritise conversion and ROI metrics alongside economic impact data when reporting to stakeholders. This isn't just about tracking website conversions and qualified leads anymore; it's about demonstrating that marketing activity directly contributes to visitor spend, room nights, and local economic benefit. Different channels serve different purposes at different stages, but all should ultimately connect to these outcomes. The destinations that can draw a clear line from marketing investment to economic impact are the ones securing bigger budgets and greater stakeholder confidence.

The destination marketing landscape will continue evolving, with AI reshaping discovery, new platforms emerging, and existing channels adapting their algorithms and capabilities. But destinations that master these fundamentals, integration, authenticity, and meaningful measurement, will thrive regardless of how the technology shifts.

The future belongs to destinations that understand marketing as relationship building rather than interruption, that view channels as interconnected rather than independent, that embrace AI as a tool to enhance rather than replace human creativity, and that measure success through economic impact rather than just digital metrics. In an increasingly complex landscape, this clarity of purpose becomes your greatest competitive advantage.

The tools, tactics, and strategies detailed throughout this guide provide the foundation for destination marketing success in 2026 and beyond. Your next step is implementation, not across every channel simultaneously, but through strategic, integrated campaigns that tell authentic stories, show up where travellers are actually looking (including in AI-generated results), and drive measurable economic results.

The travellers are out there, planning their next adventures in ways that are changing faster than ever. Your destination has unique stories to tell and experiences to offer. The channels and tactics to reach them effectively are proven and accessible. The only question remaining is: when will you begin?



Let's talk destination marketing

AI is changing how destinations plan, target and deliver marketing campaigns. Are you keeping up? Digital Dialog helps tourism boards, DMOs, hospitality groups and travel businesses get more from their campaigns and use AI with confidence.

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