

From innovation to adoption: 10 travel retail media trends to watch in 2026



Travel retail media is no longer constrained by technology or inventory.

In 2026, success will be defined by how confidently organisations connect data, media, and measurement across the journey.

The barrier to retail media success is adoption, not innovation. The required technology is largely in place, and inventory is continuing to expand across travel platforms, onsite and offsite digital environments, airports, inflight, and connected environments. Audiences remain highly valuable, highly mobile, and increasingly addressable.

Yet even with the landscape set for growth, many of the same challenges persist. Fragmented planning, underused channels and inconsistent measurement remain common.

Over the past year, Platform 195 has worked closely with airlines, airports, travel brands and media owners navigating this gap. Time and again, the issue hasn't been accessing to new tools or formats. Instead, the barrier has been the confidence in how to use what already exists, and how to connect activity across the journey in a way that actually scales commercially.

“Most of the challenges we see aren't caused by missing capability. They're caused by organisations struggling to operationalise what they already have,” says Stuart Adamson, CEO & Founder at Platform 195.

But whilst adoption has been a challenge, it is far from insurmountable. Which is good because the opportunity for travel retailers remains significant.

This report outlines ten trends we believe will shape travel retail media in 2026. Not as predictions driven by hype, but as practical shifts grounded in what is already happening, and where advantage will be created next.



01.



Retail media moves from monetisation channel to growth engine

Retail media in travel is no longer just incremental revenue on the side. In 2026, it becomes a core commercial growth engine in its own right.

Airlines, airports, and travel retailers are increasingly viewing retail media as a way to drive meaningful contribution, not just fill inventory. As a result, performance, incrementality and accountability come under much sharper scrutiny, which quickly clarifies where the real opportunity sits, and align marketing to real traveller behaviour.

“Retail media is moving out of the marketing function and into the commercial engine of the business. That’s when it really starts to scale,” explains Roy Stratford, Director, Retail Media, Platform 195.

“Once retail media becomes a growth engine, it has to stand up to the same scrutiny as any other commercial line which is a mindset shift as much as a capability shift,” adds Stuart.

This reframing underpins every trend that follows. For commercial leaders, this means retail media can no longer sit solely within marketing. To ensure its success, it needs clear ownership, targets, and accountability at a commercial level.

02.

Outcome-led retail media replaces channel-led buying

One of the clearest shifts heading into 2026 is how retail media is sold. Rather than channel-specific buys, travel retailers are beginning to offer outcome-led campaigns optimised dynamically across onsite retail media, paid social, display, video and connected TV (CTV). Success is measured against shared KPIs such as bookings, revenue, ROAS and qualified traffic.

This approach mirrors performance-max models, but with the crucial difference that optimisation is powered by first-party travel intent data, not generic signals.

“Retailers are evolving from media owners into performance partners. When optimisation and accountability sit together, budgets get bigger and commitments get longer,” says Anthony Bridges, Head of Platforms at Platform 195.

“Advertisers are no longer interested in buying channels in isolation. They want outcomes – and they expect retailers to take responsibility for delivering them,” notes Roy.

For many organisations, this is a structural change, not just a new product on the rate card. For partnerships leaders, this requires a shift from selling inventory to owning outcomes and being measured accordingly.

03.

AI becomes a strategic planning layer, not just an optimisation tool

AI will continue to dominate conversation in 2026, but its most valuable role is shifting upstream. Rather than only automating workflows or optimising activity in-flight, AI is increasingly being used to support planning, forecasting and decision-making — areas of travel retail media that have historically been slow, manual, and fragmented. Used well, AI can:

- Surface patterns across journeys, channels, and audiences
- Shape better strategies, not just execute existing ones
- Cut down the manual analysis that simply doesn't scale

“The real opportunity for AI in travel media isn't hands-off buying. It's helping teams make better decisions earlier, when it actually changes outcomes,” explains John Gonzalez, Paid Media Lead at Platform 195.

“The risk with AI isn't how much or how little you use it; it's using it without intent. Success will come from spending time to identify how and where it will genuinely remove tension,” adds Stuart.

Beyond human decision-making, the next phase of AI in travel retail media will involve AI systems making decisions on behalf of travellers. As AI agents increasingly research, compare and shortlist travel options, the role of retail media shifts from influencing clicks to influencing decisions. For travel retailers, this opens up a new category of retail media products — from sponsored recommendations to preferred partner placements and structured inventory feeds designed to shape AI-led outcomes, not just page-level exposure.

“As AI starts to mediate travel decisions, retail media has to evolve beyond impressions. The value shifts to influencing outcomes inside AI-driven journeys,” says Anthony.

04.

Time for
a break?



DOOH evolves into networked retail media infrastructure

DOOH remains one of the biggest growth opportunities in travel retail media, not because it's new, but because it's still not operationalised at scale.

Programmatic access, dynamic creative and contextual triggers have existed for some time. The change now underway – and where the opportunity lies – is in adoption. Buyers are becoming more comfortable, and operational barriers are finally starting to fall away with networks adopting open marketplace environments for buying automation. At the same time, DOOH in travel is expanding beyond airports and high streets into:

- Lounges, attractions, and in-destination environments
- Owned travel and retail spaces
- Networks built by brands themselves, not just traditional media owners

“The opportunity isn’t more screens. It’s connecting them into networks that reflect how travellers actually move,” says Stuart.

“When DOOH is viewed as different venues and differing networks, rather than just a placement, it becomes easier to plan, easier to buy and far easier to prove value,” adds John.

In 2026, DOOH growth will come far more from better use of existing infrastructure than from adding new screens.



Context turns physical media into true travel retail media

Context is what turns DOOH from exposure into relevance. In travel, this is most visible in physical environments — where signals such as flight status, location and dwell time can influence messaging in real time — but the same principle applies across digital platforms, where intent, behaviour and planning signals play the same role.

Too often, DOOH is still planned as if it's static, relying on fixed creative, fixed messaging, and minimal variation. That approach ignores the single biggest advantage travel environments have over most other channels, real-world context that actually matters to the audience.

“Relevance is now the performance lever. If it doesn’t feel helpful to the traveller, it won’t scale commercially,” notes Roy.

As adoption catches up, context becomes a default planning input rather than a nice-to-have add-on.

06.



CTV and video become core performance channels

Whilst CTV is no longer emerging, it is still not consistently planned as part of the retail media journey.

With smart TV adoption now mainstream, reach is no longer the question. Rather, what's lagging is how CTV is planned and connected to the wider retail media journey.

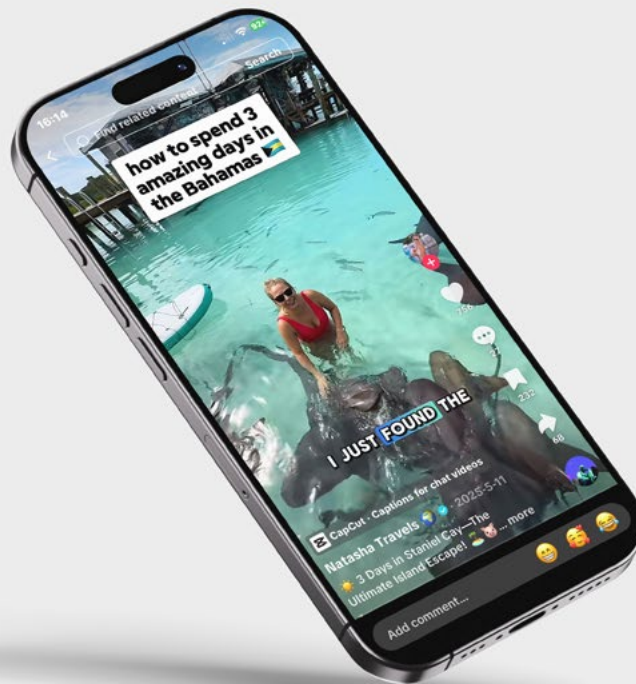
At the same time, AI is dramatically reducing the cost of producing destination, hotel, and offer-based videos at scale. The result is a shift toward video-first retail media, deployed across CTV, YouTube, TikTok, Meta and onsite environments.

“Video is becoming the default retail media format because it can now be produced, personalised and optimised at scale,” says Anthony.

“As video becomes cheaper to produce, the differentiator will be how intelligently it’s deployed across the journey, not just the volume of it,” notes John.

As measurement and addressability improve, CTV increasingly competes for performance budgets, not just brand spend. As a result, in 2026 static placements will increasingly be treated as lower-value inventory.

07.



TikTok moves from discovery channel to intent engine

TikTok is already influencing how people discover and think about travel. What's changing is how deliberately that influence is being used.

For many travel brands, TikTok still sits on the edge of the plan, tested in isolation, and measured mainly on engagement. In reality, it is increasingly shaping early-stage intent in ways that resemble upper-funnel travel search more than traditional social.

For travel retailers, the opportunity is no longer just influence but monetisation, using TikTok to generate and qualify intent that can be activated across retail media environments.

As TikTok's user demographic continues to shift and gain momentum with an older audience, it becomes an integral part of any travel retail media channel mix.

In 2026, the opportunity is to integrate TikTok more clearly into the retail media journey – feeding intent into CTV, DOOH and onsite environments that carry it forward. For retailers, this creates a chance to monetise demand earlier in the journey at the point of inspiration before travellers enter more competitive search environments.

08.

First-party data and clean rooms outperform inventory sales

As competition in retail media increases, inventory alone is no longer enough to differentiate.

Privacy-safe data collaboration, clean rooms and identity solutions allow travel retailers to monetise audiences and insight, not just placements. Advertisers increasingly buy access to high-intent traveller segments that activate both onsite and offsite.

In practice, this increasingly puts loyalty at the centre of retail media competitiveness. Retailers with strong loyalty programmes can recognise travellers across journeys, environments, and time — creating richer, more addressable audiences for advertisers. Those without loyalty will struggle to offer anything beyond short-term intent or pure scale.

“Retailers that don’t yet operate a loyalty scheme are increasingly looking to create one in order to access the benefits the data can bring. It’s fast becoming the foundation for sustainable retail media growth,” says Roy.

“As retail media matures, value shifts away from where ads appear and towards how effectively audiences can actually be activated. That’s why data, not inventory, is where margin increasingly sits,” explains Anthony.

As more retailers launch retail media propositions, data quality and reach will increasingly determine who captures incremental spend and who competes on price alone.

Retailers without strong data and reach will find it harder to compete on anything other than price and scale.



Inflight media and connectivity enter an accountability phase

Inflight media has reach, attention and a captive audience. What it lacks today is consistent accountability.

Spend remains heavily weighted towards seatback screens, if measurement exists at all, it often relies on recall studies and post-flight surveys. At the same time, advances in satellite connectivity are turning aircraft and vessels into live environments rather than closed loops.

“Inflight lacks proof, not opportunity – there is plenty of that. Once that gap closes, scale will follow,” says Stuart.

In 2026, connectivity decisions will increasingly shape media value enabling richer formats, clearer attribution, and greater commercial confidence.



10.

Measurement, incrementality and trust define the winners

As more retailers enter the market, both competition and scrutiny rise.

Incrementality, ROAS and true contribution are no longer optional. Manual processes, siloed channels and retrofitted reporting make it harder to prove value — and harder to grow anything beyond test budgets.

“Retail media is getting more competitive, and that’s a good thing. It forces better thinking around value, not just volume,” says Roy.

“Incrementality only becomes visible when measurement is designed in, not bolted on. That’s where many retail media propositions still struggle,” adds Anthony.

The travel brands that succeed in 2026 will be those that combine performance with trust to deliver relevance that feels helpful, not intrusive. In practice, this means investing in measurement early, not retrofitting it once budgets are already under the microscope.

What's the takeaway for 2026?

Across DOOH, context, CTV, social, inflight and data, the pattern is consistent. The technology is ready. The environments are valuable. The audiences are there. What's often missing is confidence in how these pieces fit together.

The biggest gains in travel retail media in 2026 won't come from chasing what's new. They'll come from using what already exists with more clarity, more consistency and much sharper commercial intent.

Why travel brands work with Platform 195

Retail media success in 2026 will be defined by how effectively organisations connect strategy, execution, and measurement across the travel journey.

That's where many travel brands and retailers struggle, not through lack of ambition, but because retail media sits across too many functions to be solved in isolation.

Platform 195 works with airlines, airports, OTAs, tour operators and travel brands to bridge that gap in a way that fits their existing teams and tech. We combine deep travel expertise with platform, performance, and retail media specialism to help organisations move from experimentation to scalable, accountable growth.





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