



May 2025



# Retail Media ROAS Demystified:

## A Guide To Understanding Your Brand's ROAS



In partnership with professors  
from Northwestern University  
Kellogg School of Management.

# Retail Media ROAS Demystified: A Guide To Understanding Your Brand's ROAS

Despite rapid growth of Retail Media Networks (RMNs), measurement standards and transparency have lagged. Many advertisers and RMNs rely on Return on Ad Spend (ROAS) as a performance metric to drive investment decisions. Yet the ROAS methodologies used across RMNs are complex and can meaningfully vary.

## Goal of Our Work

Create greater transparency and understanding around the differences in ROAS methodologies across RMNs and arm advertisers with tools to support conversations with their RMN partners and within the industry.

## What We Share

- + Overview of the key ROAS methodology differences across RMNs
- + Analysis from 573 campaigns from Albertsons Media Collective showing how changes in ROAS methodology change results
- + Important questions for advertisers to use to drive more transparent measurement conversations with their partner RMNs

## What We Learned

On average, ROAS fluctuated by 63% depending on the different methodologies used. A retail media investment could be considered successful or unsuccessful based on underlying ROAS methodology and not impact on buyer behavior.

	Methodology		Average Shift in ROAS
Household vs. Customer Sales Attribution	Household	→ Customer	25%
Product Set Attribution	Umbrella Brands Halo	→ Brand Halo	35%
Untraceable Sales	Extrapolated	→ Only Traceable Sales	37%
Impression Type	Served Impressions	→ IAB Viewable Impressions	5%
Total Average Impact			63%
Quartile 1			52%
Quartile 3			74%

## Where We're Going Next

Given shortfalls in ROAS, the industry must shift towards incremental ROAS (iROAS) to better measure true advertising impact. Our future work will aim to bring a similar understanding to iROAS methodology and provide tools for advertisers.



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# Executive Summary

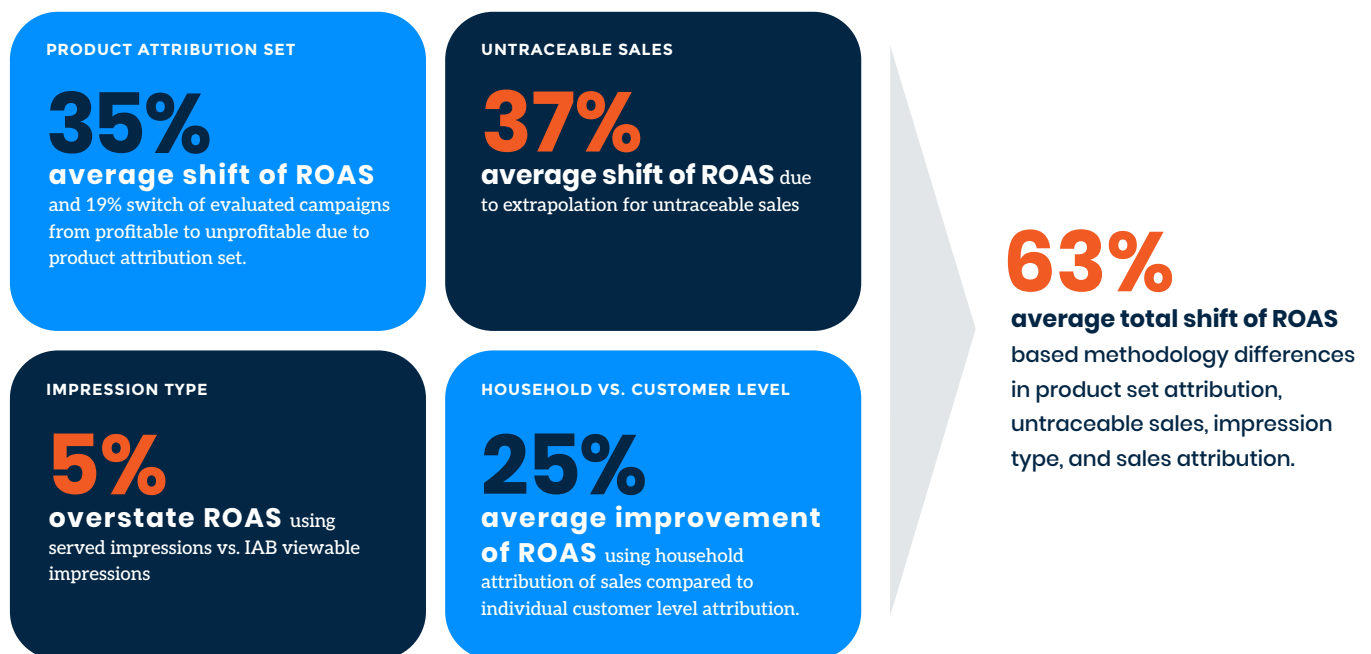


# RMNs can drive immense variation in ROAS based on methodology choices

The rapid growth of Retail Media Networks (RMNs) has revolutionized how brands engage with customers, yet the different methodologies used by RMNs to calculate Return on Ad Spend (ROAS) creates significant challenges for advertisers. Our paper explores some of the intricacies of ROAS calculation, highlighting the implications of variations in sales reporting granularity, untraceable sales methods, attribution, and impression types. Through an extensive analysis of 573 cross-category off-site display campaigns

from Albertsons Media Collective (The Collective) we explore how these methodological differences can substantially impact observed media performance.

Our findings indicate that ROAS can fluctuate on average by 63% depending on the different methodologies leveraged. The range of possible ROAS outputs is wide and driven by the conservativeness of approach and the nuances of different RMN and brand businesses. We found that:



To empower advertisers, we provide 11 powerful questions to help brands navigate ROAS methodology conversations with RMNs, ensuring transparency and greater understanding of industry performance metrics.

Our analysis demonstrates that RMN ROAS methodology differences and subjectivity make the metric a poor tool for performance comparison and optimization across RMNs,

between retail media and national media, and even between channels on a single RMN.

To account for the shortfalls of ROAS, industry shifts towards incremental ROAS (iROAS) are necessary to better measure true advertising impact. Our future work will aim to bring a similar understanding to iROAS methodology nuances and provide tools for advertisers.



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# Background



## Industry Context

The Retail Media (RM) space is experiencing immense growth, with brands leveraging RM as an effective marketing channel to engage customers in more targeted ways with the added benefit of closed-loop reporting – tying transactions to media touchpoints. However, this rapid growth, built on top of legacy retailer marketing infrastructure, has resulted in varied and sometimes nascent approaches to measurement across Retail Media Networks (RMNs). Given the increased investment in RM, brands are demanding

more transparent and elevated measurement from RMNs, with a particular focus on incrementality and cross-channel measurement.

In February 2024, the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and Media Rating Council (MRC) released their Retail Media Measurement Guidelines. We applaud these guidelines as a step forward toward industry standardization and clarity. However, we believe the industry has opportunity to go further.

## Our Goal

Create greater transparency and understanding around the nuanced differences in ROAS methodologies that can lead to meaningful changes in observed media performance. Our work aims to address these needs through exploratory analysis and questions that enable advertisers to have more effective performance discussions with their partner RMNs.





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# Methodology



# The Components of ROAS and Industry Methodology

While ROAS is a simple calculation at a surface level<sup>1</sup>, how attributable sales is calculated within the formula can vary vastly depending on product attribution set, untraceable sales, media attribution, household or customer attribution,

and impression types used, among other nuances (Figure 1). In this section we outline the different components of ROAS, and the various methods commonly used for calculation across the RM industry.

Components of a RMN's ROAS				
Product Attribution Set	Untraceable Sales	Media Attribution	Household vs. Customer Level Sales Attribution	Impression Type
Products included for sales attribution to an ad	The approach taken to account for sales that cannot be directly matched to a customer	The approach taken to credit media with influencing a purchase	The approach to credit sales to a media exposure at a household or customer-level	The approach to use either served or viewable impressions

<sup>1</sup> ROAS = Attributed Sales / Ad Spend where (1) attributed sales = sales assigned to a media tactic and (2) ad spend = invested working media dollars in a media tactic (i.e., no fees)

Figure 1



# Product Attribution Set

RMNs use different levels of product sets to attribute sales and calculate ROAS. The breadth in possibilities is wide and definitions used can vary based on a RMNs internal brand mapping or use of external brand mapping. Broadly, we see four levels of product attribution each with increasingly larger portion of sales:



Figure 2

## Untraceable Sales

Not all sales can be traced back to a media exposure. This comes to life through two distinct matching processes. **The first match is the retailer's ability to match a transaction to their customer records**—typically done via e-commerce authentication, loyalty club participation at check-out, or tracking of traceable tenders like credit cards.

**The second match process is the retailer's ability to match media impressions to the same customer data as the transaction records.** Retailers may rely on 3rd party identity management companies or do direct matches with media platforms via personally identifiable information (PII) matching.

### Industry Traceable Sales Variations



Figure 3

Extrapolation determines how non-traceable sales are represented in the ROAS calculation. RMN practices range from either excluding all non-traceable sales in their ROAS equation, to using a RMN-specific type of modeled extrapolation (e.g., based on customer data), or using a simple sales gross up (Figure 4).

### Extrapolation Methodology Range



Figure 4

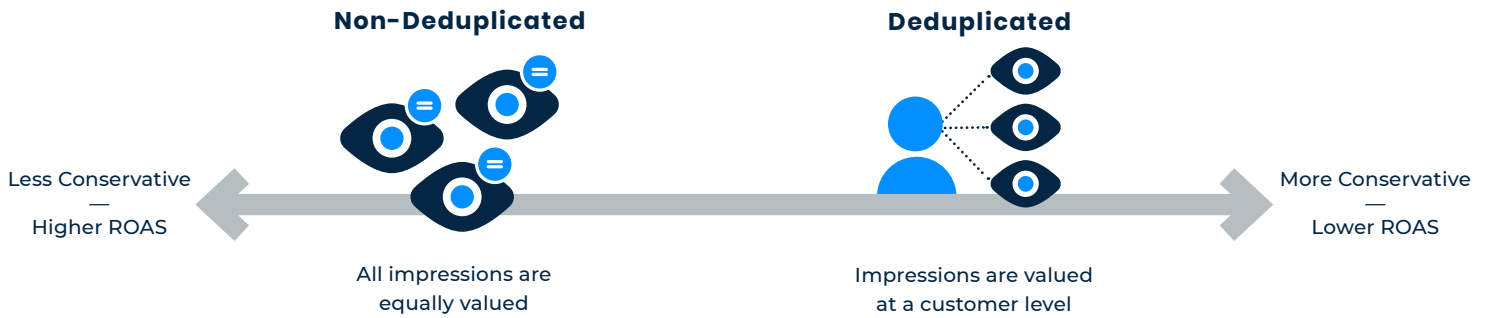
# Media Attribution

Media attribution is the logic used to give credit to media in a consumer's path<sup>2</sup> to purchase. How much weight, or percent of sales credit, is given to each touchpoint and whether those attributed sales are double-counted across touchpoints can vary based on the technologies and methodology leveraged

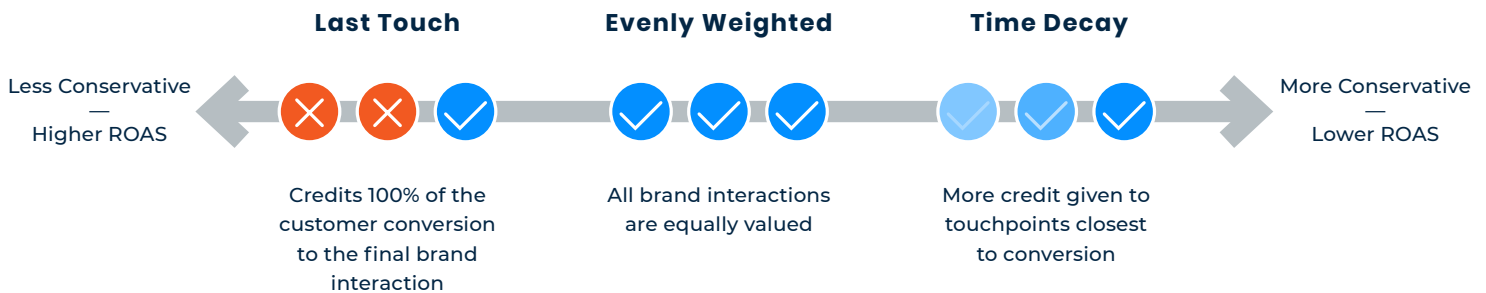
by a RMN. Today, the industry is nascent in the approaches it uses for this part of attribution. However, as the industry becomes more sophisticated, we expect evenly-weighted, time-decay, and de-duplication to become more common within ROAS calculations (*Figure 5*).

## Media Deduplication and Attribution Methodologies

### Deduplication



### Attribution



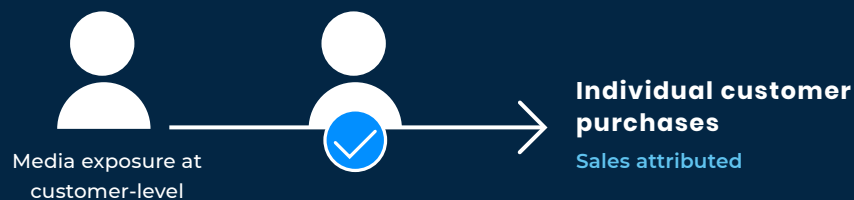
**Figure 5**

<sup>2</sup> Media attribution windows may also vary from 14 to 28 days. We believe 14 days is relatively standard.

## Household vs. Customer Sales Attribution

RMNs can also attribute sales of a media exposure at the customer or household level. The use of household level attribution increases the possible amount of sales included in the ROAS calculation (*Figure 6*). This part of attribution has wider variation of approaches in the industry with some RMNs using customer-level and others household-level.

### Customer Attribution



### Household Attribution

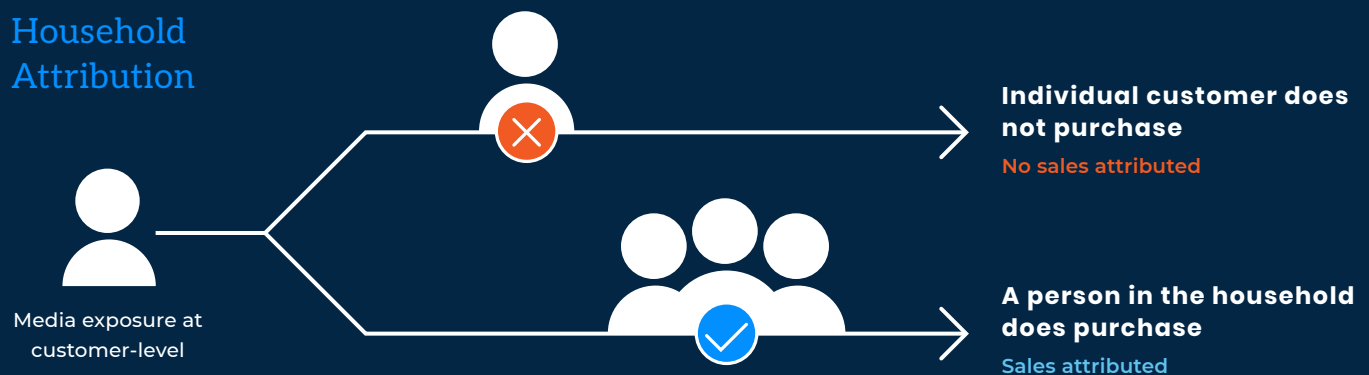


Figure 6

## Impression Type

The IAB has declared a standard<sup>3</sup> for viewable impressions across ad sizes in both display and video. While this industry standard exists, not all RMNs use IAB viewable impressions in their ROAS calculation and instead use served impressions which can attribute sales to a

campaign when an ad was not viewed. Served impressions are records provided by an ad server outlining the impressions delivered to a browser but provides no confirmation on if a user viewed the impression – or even if viewability was possible.

<sup>3</sup> IAB Viewable Impression Standard = For display ads, at least 50% of the ad's pixels must be visible on the user's screen for a minimum of one continuous second. For video ads, at least 50% of the ad's pixels must be visible on the screen for a minimum of two continuous seconds



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# Analysis Findings and Recommendations





## Our Analysis Approach

Our analysis examined 573 different campaigns from The Collective across categories and brands during both promotional and non-promotional periods from January 2023 to September 2024. Campaigns within our analysis were all executed offsite and had adequate data, including creative that could be leveraged for ROAS analysis. No co-branded campaigns were leveraged.

Within our dataset, we explored how different methods for calculating ROAS could vary based on approaches to product attribution set, untraceable sales, household vs. customer attribution and impression viewability. **We found that ROAS methodology can drive a large difference in reported performance, potentially changing the overarching investment decisions of an advertiser.**

**Methodology  
Differences  
Drive Immense  
Variation in ROAS**

**573**

campaigns from The Collective were analyzed from January 2023 – September 2024.





# Product Attribution Set Impact

Our analysis focused on product attribution set shifts between Umbrella Brands Halo and Brand Halo given The Collective's current methodology and data availability. Comparisons to Brand + Category Halo or Product Hero would generate even larger differences in performance. Our analysis therefore represents a conservative estimate of the impact of product attribution set shifts. **Changing from Umbrella Brands Halo to Brand Halo product**

**attribution set method drove an average ROAS difference of -35% (-\$0.61).**<sup>4</sup> This average difference was uniform across categories. However, brands with a lower sales velocity, were more impacted by the Umbrella Brands Halo to Brand Halo shifts and saw a ROAS difference of -76% (-\$0.52), likely driven by smaller brand's having less concentration of sales velocity<sup>5</sup> in individual brand vs. their more dominant large brand competitors.

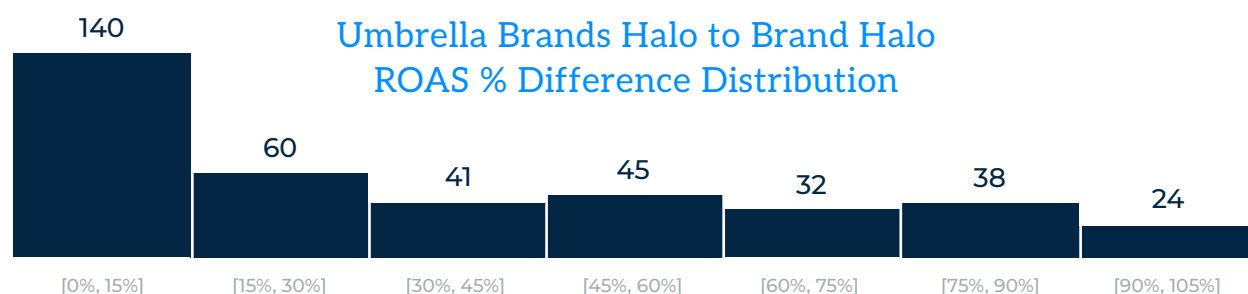


Figure 7

Notably, a shift from Umbrella Brands Halo to Brand Halo resulted in **19% of campaigns shifting from profitable (>\$1 ROAS) to unprofitable (<\$1 ROAS)**. In total, 32% of campaigns saw a decrease of >50% (on average \$1.46) when product attribution set approach changed. In *Figure 8*, we bring the shift from Umbrella Brands

Halo to Brand Halo to life through an example from brands within Frozen Foods and Pet food categories. Of note, the level of product attribution used in ROAS calculations can more easily be influenced by a brand during campaign set-up with a RMN vs other components we analyzed.

## Umbrella Brands Halo to Brand Halo Example

	# Campaigns	Avg Umbrella Brands Halo ROAS	Avg Brand Halo ROAS	% Change
Frozen Food Brand	2	\$4.36	\$2.02	-61%
Pet Food Brand	3	\$2.70	\$0.81	-68%

Figure 8

<sup>4</sup> Of the 573 campaigns in our analysis set, 189 did not have Halo Brand associated with them. These campaigns were removed from the product attribution set portion of the analysis. <sup>5</sup> Sales velocity = Average of instore + e-commerce sales for a given brand.





## Untraceable Sales Impact

The extrapolation of traceable sales to account for untraceable sales can also drive a meaningful shift in ROAS performance. The magnitude of this shift depends on both the match rates that determine the portion of untraceable sales and on the extrapolation approach used to generate sales for the untraceable portion of sales. Our analysis found that low match rates drove a higher risk of ROAS inaccuracy because sales from traceable customers are unlikely to be similar to those from untraceable customers.

An example industry average for match rates between retailers' household customer files and their identity resolution partners could be 90%. Meanwhile, the

match rate between the identity resolution partner and a set of media campaigns can vary depending on channels, platforms, and publishers. We chose 60% as an example of a similar retail media offsite display campaigns. The combination of these two example matches would yield a 54% total match rate (i.e., 90% x 60% as demonstrated in *Figure 9*). A RMN may have a campaign with a similar identity resolution to media exposure match (62%) but a less traceable customer file (e.g., 60%) and will therefore have a substantially lower average total match rate of 37% (i.e., 62% x 60%). In *Figure 10*, we outline the relationship between match rates and extrapolation risk with a set of example brands each with varied match rates.

### Example Total Match Rate

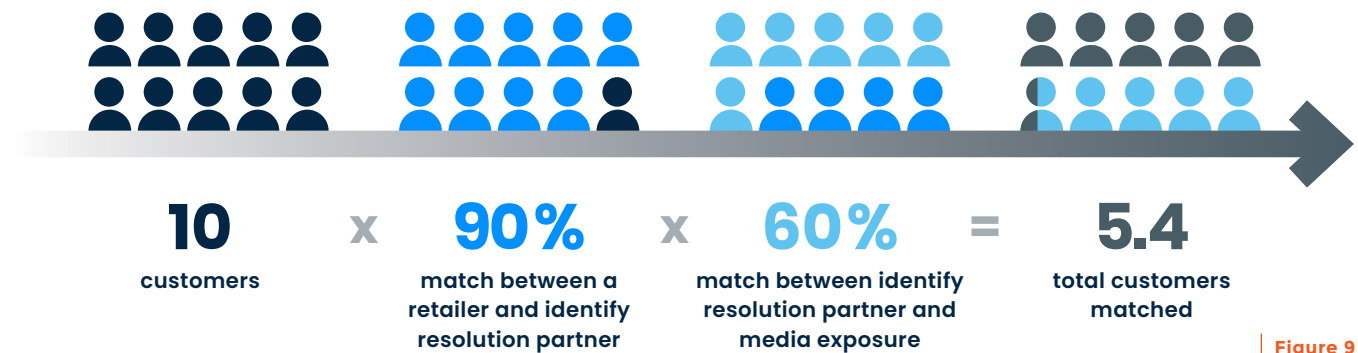


Figure 9

### Match Rate and Extrapolation Risk by Brand Example

Campaign-Level	Illustrative Total Match Rate	Non-Extrapolated ROAS	ROAS	Revenue Multiplier
Brand 1	27%	\$0.49	\$1.85	3.75
Brand 2	55%	\$1.31	\$2.40	1.83
Brand 3	71%	\$1.36	\$1.91	1.40

Figure 10



We note that when adjusting between traceable sales only and a simple gross up of untraceable sales, there was a non-linear relationship between total match rate and the revenue multiplier required (*Figure 11*). In other words, brands and RMNs with low total match rates

should be wary of how their ROAS may be meaningfully inaccurate, either over or understated. Typically, match rates of a brand or category's shoppers are not shared via standard RM reporting with advertisers and would need to be requested ad hoc from the retailer.

### Non-Linear Relationship Between Total Match Rate and Revenue Multiplier

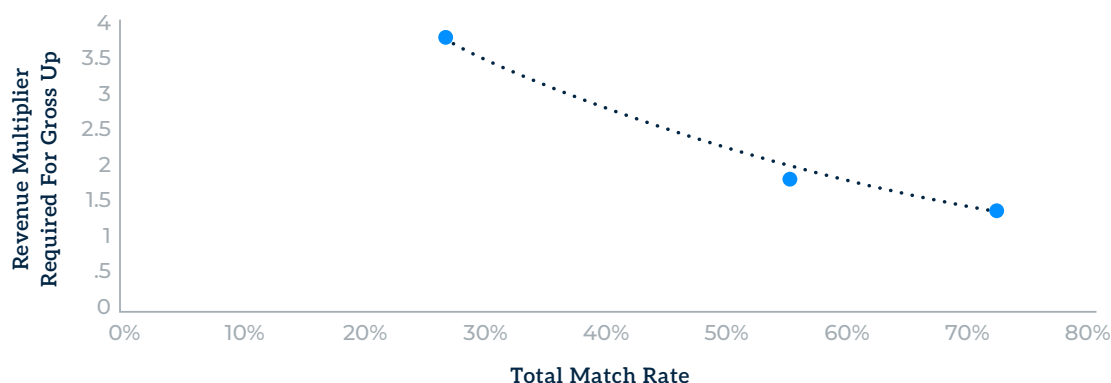


Figure 11

## Impression Type Impact

The IAB/MRC has set forth a clear standard for Viewability. However, some RMNs, including The Collective, continue to report ROAS based on served impressions. This practice can result in sales being attributed to a campaign even when the customer never viewed an ad from the campaign. Currently, The Collective achieves an average viewability

rate of 85% across devices<sup>6</sup>. In *Figure 12*, we demonstrate how using only served impressions can impact performance through a yogurt brand and refrigerated meat brand. Our data shows that the use of served impressions can overstate ROAS by on average of 5%. A retailer with a lower viewability rate would be expected to have a much larger variance.

### Viewability Example

	Served Impressions	IAB Viewable Impressions	Served ROAS	IAB Viewable ROAS	% Change
Yogurt Brand	350,551	331,450	\$1.87	\$1.79	-4%
Refrigerated Meat Brand	685,935	565,468	\$0.75	\$0.68	-10%

Figure 12


<sup>6</sup> Source: Internal assessment of The Collective's internal campaign data

## Total Impact

When we bring together all variations in ROAS methodology we see that ROAS can vary by an average of 63%, with an interquartile range within our dataset of 22%. We demonstrate this variation by shifting each component of ROAS methodology in a step-by-step approach going from the least conservative

ROAS to the most conservative ROAS for a set of example brands (*Figure 13*). Given the significance of the variance, a campaign could easily be deemed as 'successful' vs. 'unsuccessful' agnostic of any impact to buyer behavior and driven entirely by the logic of the underlying ROAS methodology.

## Total ROAS Variation Breakdown Example

ROAS Methodology		Rice Brand	Non-Perishable Food Brand	Carbonated Soft Drink Brand
<div>Least Conservative</div> <div></div> <div>Most Conservative</div>	Extrapolated, Umbrella Brands Halo, Household-Level, and Served Impressions	\$2.27	\$2.05	\$ 7.89
	Extrapolated, Umbrella Brands Halo, Customer-Level, and Served Impressions	\$1.82	\$1.64	\$ 6.31
	Extrapolated, Brand Halo, Customer-Level, and Served Impressions	\$1.60	\$0.61	\$ 0.93
	Un-extrapolated, Brand Halo, Customer-Level, and Served Impressions	\$1.09	\$0.45	\$ 0.55
	Un-extrapolated, Brand Halo, Customer-Level, and IAB Viewable Impressions	\$1.04	\$0.43	\$ 0.53
Total % Variation		-54%	-79%	-93%

**Figure 13**





## Guidance for Advertisers

As demonstrated, there can be wide ranges of ROAS based on the method used by a RMN. Given these wide ranges, it is critical that RMNs are transparent in the methods they use and can speak to the implications of these methods to advertisers. Advertisers must be effective consumers of ROAS, using it for the right

use cases. Advertisers must also actively seek and understand ROAS methodology information from their partner RMNs. Not only will this support effective use of ROAS but also spur RMNs to actively invest in capabilities that drive greater industry measurement sophistication and transparency.

### ROAS Use Cases:

- 1** Comparison of brand performance across campaigns within a single RMN's channel if product attribution set is consistent.
- 2** Comparison of brand performance across channels if the RMN maintains methodology across those channels.



While ROAS can be leveraged in a specific set of use cases, it is a poor tool for advertisers to use for the crucial task of managing media budgets because it cannot directly connect media investment to buyer behavior.



# 11 Questions to Understand Your RMN's ROAS

To support advertisers to better understand ROAS methodologies with their partner RMNs, we have outlined these 11 Questions.

Product Attribution Set	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What is the product set granularity at which the RMN typically attributes sales to a campaign (e.g., Product Hero, Brand + Category Halo, Brand Halo, Umbrella Brands Halo)?</li><li>2. How does the RMN support brands with a lower sales velocity whose ROAS will be naturally disadvantaged?</li></ol>
Untraceable Sales	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. What is the RMNs match rate between a brand's relevant transaction records and their identity resolution partner? Is this at the household or customer level?</li><li>4. What is the brand's campaign media match rate to the identity resolution partner or media platform?</li><li>5. What is the RMN's method used for extrapolation of untraceable sales?</li></ol>
Viewability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6. Does the RMN use only IAB viewable impressions? If using served impressions, what is the % viewable on my media?</li></ol>
Media Attribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. What media attribution approach does the RMN use to credit sales to media touches?</li><li>8. Does the RMN attribute a single sale to multiple campaigns or channels?</li></ol>
Household vs. Customer Attribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>9. Does the RMN attribute sales at the household or customer level?</li></ol>
Campaign Set-up	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>10. Can a brand influence approaches to product attribution set, extrapolation, viewability, media attribution, or household vs. customer attribution during campaign set-up?</li><li>11. Can adjustments be made to approaches after a campaign is completed?</li></ol>





## Moving Beyond ROAS and Next Steps For Our Work

Performance metrics are intended to help advertisers understand the impact of their advertising investments on customers. Our analysis proves that within Retail Media, ROAS cannot fulfill this need. The differences in RMN methodologies, either driven by choice or by the nature of a retailer's business, means advertisers cannot rely on ROAS to make performance comparisons or optimizations across RMNs, between retail media and national media, or even sometimes between channels on a single RMN.

Given significant shortfalls in ROAS as a metric, we believe the industry needs to shift performance conversations away from ROAS to incremental ROAS (iROAS). Like ROAS, approaches to iROAS are varied and complex, creating challenges in understanding and comparability.

The next stage of our work aims to outline approaches to measuring iROAS (including randomized control trials (RCTs), proxy matches, and synthetic models) and the advantages and limitations of each. We will demonstrate how different limitations in iROAS approaches can drive different performance outcomes and provide a question guide for advertisers to support engagement with their partner RMNs on iROAS.





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# Appendix

## Detailed Analysis Approach

Below we highlight the different approaches we took for each portion of our ROAS analysis.

### Product Attribution Set Approach<sup>7</sup>

	Method Explanation	Example
Brand Halo	Only sales from SKUs that were included in measurement within the designated Brand are used <sup>8</sup>	<b>Brand:</b> Mac & Cheese Brand  <b>Category:</b> Mac & Cheese Dishes, Processed Cheese Food
Umbrella Brands Halo	All sales from products within the associated umbrella brands are leveraged	<b>Brand:</b> Mac & Cheese Brand + other Mac & Cheese, Dressing, and Cheese Brands in same umbrella company  <b>Expanded Categories:</b> Crackers, Ingredients & Coatings, Mac & Cheese Dishes, Salad Dressings, Spoonable Dressings & Spreads, Cheese Shreds, Processed Cheese Food, Mayonnaise, Frozen Meals Single Serve, Sauces & Marinades

<sup>7</sup> Note: Today, The Collective does not have a Brand + Category Halo or Product Hero assigned to a campaign. Rather than assume what may be a Brand's intended product we opted not to do analysis on these product attribution set approach. Therefore, our analysis is showing the conservative end of the impact of shifts between Brand Halo and Umbrella Brands Halo ROAS.

<sup>8</sup> Of the 573 campaigns in our analysis set, 189 had no difference in the products associated between Umbrella Brands Halo and Brand Halo. These campaigns were removed from the product attribution set portion of the analysis.



## Untraceable Sales Approach<sup>9</sup>

	Method Explanation	Example
No untraceable sales included	Only traceable <sup>9</sup> sales are leveraged using a Total Match Rate (i.e., The Collective customer and actual campaign match rates between The Collective and its identity resolution partner).	<b>Total Match Rate = 68%</b> <b>Matched sales = \$100,000</b> <b>Sales leveraged = \$100,000</b>
Traceable customer sales are grossed up to account for untraceable sales	Traceable sales are leveraged using a Total Match Rate and then untraceable sales are extrapolated using a simple gross up	<b>Total Match Rate = 68%</b> <b>Matched sales = \$100,000</b> <b>Sales leveraged = \$147,059</b>

## Household vs. Customer-Level Sales Attribution

	Method Explanation	Example
Household-Level Sales Attribution	Sales are attributed to a media exposure when anyone in the household of the person exposed purchases	<b>Served impressions = 500k</b> <b>Match Households with sales = 25k</b>
Customer-Level Sales Attribution	Sales are only attributed to a media exposure if the person exposed purchases	<b>Served impressions = 500k</b> <b>Match Customers with sales = 15k</b>

<sup>9</sup> Note: We did not model an approach where non-traceable sales were extrapolated with a unique approach (e.g., customer profiles within a category) because these approaches tend to be specific to a retailer. Instead, we focused just on a non-traceable sales approach and a simple gross up untraceable sales based on traceable customer sales

## Impression Type

	Method Explanation	Example
Viewable Impressions only	Only impressions that meet the IAB standard for viewability were included as identified by a Dynamic Creative Optimization partner	<b>Served impressions = 500k</b> <b>Viewability rate = 83%</b> <b>Viewable impressions used for identity resolution = 415k</b>
Served Impressions	Ad server records for total impressions served were collected	<b>Served impressions = 500k all used for identity resolution</b>

## Media Attribution

We chose not to look at method variations across attribution (last-touch, first-touch, time decay, evenly weighting, etc.) because data limitations reduced our ability to create a dataset that would allow for recreating different attribution approaches. Throughout our analysis all ROAS calculations are done using The Collective's attribution method of last touch within individual channels.

## Analysis Aggregation

To support the analysis, we aggregated our findings across different groupings to identify and better synthesize. These include:

- + Department and Category
- + Size of brand hierarchy (i.e., number of UPCs in hierarchy)
- + Annual sales velocity
- + Campaign objective (i.e., Awareness or Sales)
- + Campaign days in market
- + Return (i.e., over or under \$1 ROAS)



## Author Bios

### Albertsons Media Collective



#### Sophie Armor

is a **Data Scientist at Albertsons Media Collective**. She brings both financial services and retail media expertise to her work and specializes in causal inference and insight generation, leveraging her expertise to drive impactful data-driven decisions.



#### Levi Dantzinger

is the **leader of Marketing Science Research at Albertsons Media Collective**. He brings analytics and data science experience across industry verticals including CPG, Defense, Healthcare, InsureTech, and Retail Media. At The Collective, he focuses on innovating measurement methodologies and metrics to help advance causal understanding of Retail Media's impact on buyer behavior to help drive meaningful incremental value for brands.

### Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management



#### Eric T. Anderson

is the **Polk Bros. Chair and Professor of Marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management**. He has served on the board of directors at Canadian Tire since 2016. His research and advising focus on applied analytics and ML/AI in retail, eCommerce and financial services.



#### Brett R. Gordon

is the **Charles H. Kellstadt Professor of Marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management**. His research focuses on helping firms optimize their pricing, promotion, and advertising strategies through analytical modeling and field experiments. His current work addresses the challenge of measuring incremental advertising effectiveness while accounting for real-world marketing constraints.

### Ovative Group



#### Kate Bante

is **Vice President of Measurement at Ovative Group**. She leads a team of marketing science and analytics experts focused on helping clients address key business questions through advanced modeling and testing. Additionally, she leads measurement initiatives tackling complex industry challenges, including brand and retail media measurement.



#### Derek Nelson

is a **Senior Director of Retail Media at Ovative Group**. He leads a Retail Media Consulting team that guides mature and emerging commerce media networks to grow revenue, create efficiencies, and delight their internal and external partners. With extensive experience in leading retail media networks, Derek specializes in network measurement, reporting, and data monetization.



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Have a question or want a copy of our  
upcoming white paper on Retail Media  
Incremental ROAS Demystified?  
Let's Stay Connected!

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In partnership with professors  
from Northwestern University  
Kellogg School of Management.