



## Key Takeaways—Highlights: AUDIENCExSCIENCE 2026

March 18-19, 2026

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### Conference Summary:

ARF AUDIENCExSCIENCE 2026 underscored a market in transition: AI is reshaping workflows and discovery, attention is being refined as a useful but incomplete signal and measurement is shifting toward hybrid, privacy-safe, outcome-linked systems. Across presentations, a common thread emerged: marketers need fewer isolated metrics and more integrated frameworks that connect media exposure, creative quality, context, audience nuance and business results. Reflections on ARF's 90 years of history reinforced this larger point: the industry's tools keep changing, but the core need for independent, evidence-based guidance remains constant.

On AI, speakers recognized it as a structural force changing advertising economics, operations and research. [Laura Martin](#) of Needham & Company framed generative AI as a platform disruption that will reward scale, diversified revenue models and lower-cost operating structures. [Bob Lord](#) of Horizon Media Holdings and Horizon Global argued that AI should push agencies toward open, interoperable systems and performance-based models tied to business growth, not labor inputs. [Shelly Palmer](#) of The Palmer Group and Syracuse University went further, describing a shift from search to answer engines and from human journeys to agent-driven commerce, which could redefine discoverability, attribution and brand influence. At the same time, multiple presenters showed AI's practical upside in research and creative testing: [Dan Reines of SmithGeiger Group and Brian Sabella of ESPN](#) demonstrated conversational AI as a faster qual-quant approach; [Duane Varan](#) of MediaScience and [Pip Bingemann](#) of Springboards.ai suggested AI is highly useful for idea generation and creative iteration, but still requires human judgment, especially for evaluating originality and strategic fit. These sessions affirm that organizations need to build AI capability now while preserving transparency, governance and human oversight, while research needs to validate AI-based methods before standardizing them.

Attention and privacy sessions added needed caution. [ARF's Tracy Adams and Paul Donato](#) showed that attention can help compare channels and placements, but it should be treated as a signal rather than a trading currency or standalone predictor of brand lift. Related work

from [Megan Danielson of Google](#), [Adam Shlachter of WPP Media](#) and [Zach Kubin of Adelaide](#), along with studies from [David Bassett of Lumen](#), [Ewa Zawol of dentsu](#), [David Kietz of Kantar](#) and [Gareth Tuck of eye square](#) and [Lyndsey Albertson of NBCU](#), suggested that attentive environments matter, but emotional engagement, skippability, creative quality and media context all shape outcomes. In parallel, [Joetta Gobell of People Inc.](#), [Jennifer Ng of The Trade Desk](#) and [ARF's Tracy Adams](#) showed privacy is now a baseline expectation: consumers will share data when value is clear and control is visible, but trust remains fragile. The practical takeaway is that marketers should optimize for quality of attention and transparency together, rather than chasing exposure at any cost.

Audience and media measurement discussions focused on fragmentation, streaming and cross-platform duplication. Presenters from Roku, Antenna, Nielsen, Comscore and others converged on the same answer: hybrid measurement systems that combine panel data, census-scale data, synthetic data and modeling are becoming essential. [Nicole Cooper of Roku](#) and [Michele Donati of The Futures Group at Horizon](#) highlighted FAST's emergence as a mainstream, lower-clutter environment. [Pete Doe and David Kurzynski of Nielsen](#), [Caitlin Leffers and Michael Vinson of Comscore](#), and [Rameez Tase and Gilles Duterque of Antenna](#) each showed how synthetic or fused datasets can improve cross-platform and streaming measurement while preserving privacy. For marketers, this means planning and optimization must increasingly account for duplication, attention quality and subscription or business outcomes—not just impressions. For researchers, the priority is explainability: more sophisticated systems will only gain traction if stakeholders understand how they work and why they differ from legacy measures.

Finally, presentations on context, creators and diverse audience strategy emphasized that effectiveness depends on resonance, not just reach. Research from [Comcast Advertising \(Kristin Shumaker and Twinkal Patel\)](#), [Mediaprobe \(Pedro Almedia, Ed Hunt and Larry DeGaris\)](#), [DAIVID \(Peter Daboll\)](#) and [Genius Sports \(Jennifer Pelino and Abhijit Shome\)](#) showed that contextual and emotional alignment can materially improve recall and response. Creator sessions from [Ipsos \(Megan de Leon\)](#), [Snapchat \(Ryan Huff\)](#), [CreativeX \(Anastasia Leng\)](#), [Swayable \(Tyler Montague\)](#) and [Influential \(Maddie Perkins\)](#) argued that creator marketing works best when authenticity is paired with disciplined branding and measurement. And sessions from [UniWorld Group \(Kristin Smith-Clinton\)](#), [Ipsos \(Janelle A. James\)](#), [TelevisaUnivision \(Sergey Fogelson and Pouya Tehrani\)](#), [GLAAD \(Sarah Feldman\)](#) and [Kenvue \(Efthymios Psarftis\)](#) made clear that growth will come from better understanding underserved and intersectional audiences through cultural intelligence, not blunt segmentation. The strongest implication across all three areas is that marketers should design for relevance, trust and lived experience, while researchers should expand their frameworks to capture cultural, contextual and behavioral nuance alongside scale.

## Featured Presentation Highlights

*Keynote*

### Wall Street's View of the Ad Industry

**Laura Martin, CFA & CMT** – Senior Internet & Media Analyst, Needham & Company

In her keynote, Laura Martin (Needham & Company) discussed the rapidly changing state of ad industry economics. Generative AI is the fourth major platform disruption after PCs, the internet and mobile, and Wall Street is trying to determine how AI will reshape future cash flows across industries. Generative AI may disrupt everything, everywhere, all at once. Wall Street trusts profit-and-loss results over executive commentary and expects AI adoption to result in lower costs, fewer full time employees and stronger revenue trends.

- **Potential benefits of AI for advertising and measurement** include lower content creation costs, more real-time optimization, better use of unstructured data and achieving more work with fewer employees.
- **Potential risks to the measurement industry** include AI agents bypassing ads and the purchase funnel, stronger walled gardens, lower relative value for third-party data and weaker need for measurement in some performance-driven environments, such retail media networks and performance CTV.

### When Sports Meets Conversational AI

**Dan Reines** – SVP, Research & Insights, SmithGeiger Group

**Brian Sabella** – Director, Original Content & Research Innovation, ESPN

Dan Reines of SmithGeiger and Brian Sabella of ESPN explored how conversational AI research methods can deepen understanding of sports audience behavior in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. Methodologically, the study employs a “conversational survey” approach, where AI moderators simulate real-time dialogue with respondents, blending qualitative depth with quantitative scale. Findings reveal that while linear TV remains dominant for reach and engagement, digital platforms—particularly YouTube and podcasts—are reshaping consumption patterns by offering flexibility, speed and content variety.

- **Conversational AI research increases depth and speed**, generating ~45-word responses (vs. ~10 in traditional surveys) and delivering qual-quant insights in ~1–2 weeks vs. months.
- **Audience fragmentation reflects choice, not disengagement**, as fans curate experiences across platforms and remain highly satisfied with both linear and digital formats.

### Stage 3 of the ARF Attention Measurement Validation Initiative: Attention as Signal, Not Currency

**Tracy Adams, Ph.D.** – Sr. Director, Research & Insights, ARF

**Paul Donato** – Chief Research Officer, ARF

Paul Donato and Tracy Adams (both from the ARF) shared findings from Phase 3 of the ARF Attention Measurement Validation Initiative, including an examination of what attention metrics reveal about advertising effectiveness. Attention metrics are widely used in planning, trading and optimization; however, attention is complex. Attention metrics are rapidly being adopted as indicators of media quality. Sixty-four percent of agency media planners use attention frequently or constantly.

Among Phase 3's findings :

- **Attention scores are higher for television than for social** across all campaigns and all measurement techniques, with time exposure differences cited as a contributing factor. **Prime time and late night TV score highest in attention.**
- **Social attention scores fall within a narrow band.**
- **Attention alone does not predict brand lift.** Brand lift is also driven by media weight, number of impressions, ability to skip the ad and other factors.

### The Creator Paradox: Why Authentic Content Isn't Enough

**Anastasia Leng** – CEO & Founder, CreativeX

Anastasia Leng of CreativeX challenged prevailing assumptions about creator marketing in her presentation, by examining whether creator content is truly effective for brands. While doing so, she introduced what she calls the “creator paradox”—the tension between authenticity and advertising effectiveness. The findings show that while brands have rapidly increased investment in creators—often treating them as both production and media channels—many campaigns fail to deliver brand value due to poor execution. Specifically, creator content is frequently optimized for authenticity at the expense of basic advertising effectiveness, leading to under-branded, poorly structured ads that primarily build the creator's equity rather than the brand's. However, the research also demonstrates that effectiveness improves when brands combine creator authenticity with established creative best practices, suggesting that the future lies in integrating—not choosing between—these two approaches.

- **Early branding improves performance**, with creator ads that include branding in the first three seconds delivering +16% higher video completion rates and lower cost per view.
- **Human-centered storytelling drives stronger results**, with brands adopting creator-style elements (e.g., people-first narratives) seeing ~40% increases in video completions.

## Rethinking Privacy Across the Advertising Ecosystem

**Joetta Gobell, Ph.D.** – SVP, Data Strategy & Insights, People Inc.

**Jennifer Ng** – GM, Advertiser Insights, The Trade Desk

**Tracy Adams, Ph.D.** – Sr. Director, Research & Insights, ARF

Joetta Gobell (People Inc.), Jennifer Ng (The Trade Desk) and Tracy Adams (ARF) rethink privacy with three topics that encompass the “What” of consumer data sharing, the “So What” of trust dynamics and the “Now What” of AI expectations, drawing on combined insights from ARF’s Annual Privacy Study and Humantel Ads’ research on privacy and trust. With the central finding that consumers now view privacy as a basic right, the research showed that they are also becoming more selective and are particularly less comfortable sharing demographic identifiers such as race or gender. Although institutional trust in media, advertising and to some extent, AI, is rebounding, effective personalization must be purposeful, proportional and grounded in user control to maintain consumer confidence.

- **Privacy is now a baseline expectation.** Brands must get it right just to participate. A significant 68% of consumers strongly believe that privacy is a basic right.
- **Consumers will share data if the value is clear,** especially when benefits are immediate, relevant and personalized. Nearly 60% are willing to share purchase history for personalized recommendations.