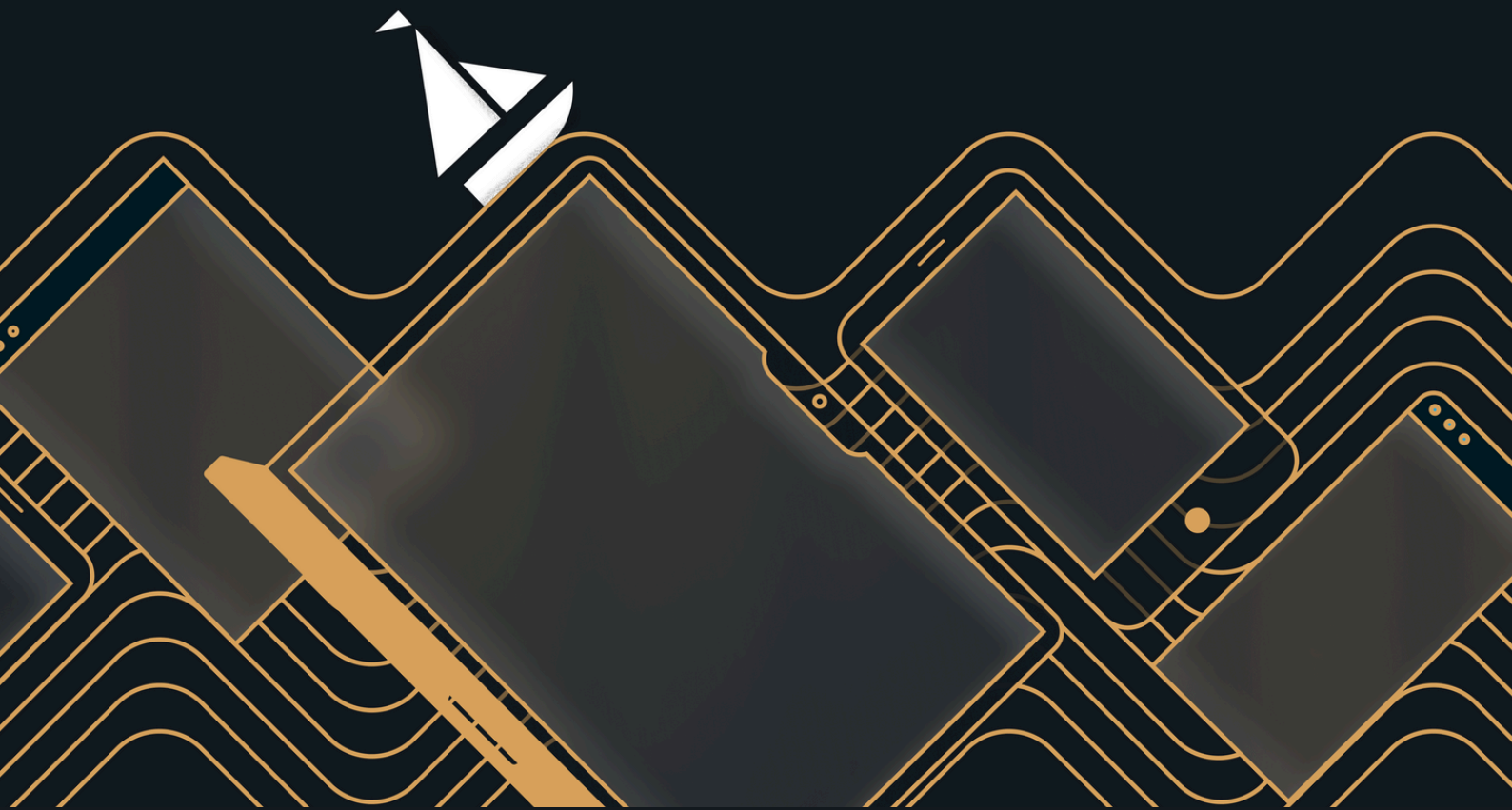


REPORT

How media product leaders are navigating the more with less era



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Executive Summary

Media companies are under extraordinary pressure to modernize outdated infrastructure, build direct audience relationships, and respond to AI disruption while operating with constrained resources and fewer people. In this environment, product and technology teams are being asked to deliver transformation while maintaining the status quo. The result is a paradox: teams must innovate to stay relevant but are resourced only to maintain what already exists.

This report, based on a survey of 131 media product professionals and a half dozen interviews with product leaders from top publishing organizations and WordPress VIP, offers a grounded view of how product leaders are prioritizing in 2025.

Key findings include:

- Audience engagement is the top product priority, but tech limitations and organizational silos often prevent meaningful progress.
- A majority of respondents allocate most of their technology budgets to maintaining existing systems, leaving little for experimentation.
- AI is being used to streamline workflows and assist in marketing and operations, but editorial adoption remains largely off-limits.
- Many companies have adopted third-party or hybrid CMS platforms to avoid the overhead of custom development.
- Product leadership is often fragmented, with conflicting priorities and limited influence over business decisions.



Brian Morrissey

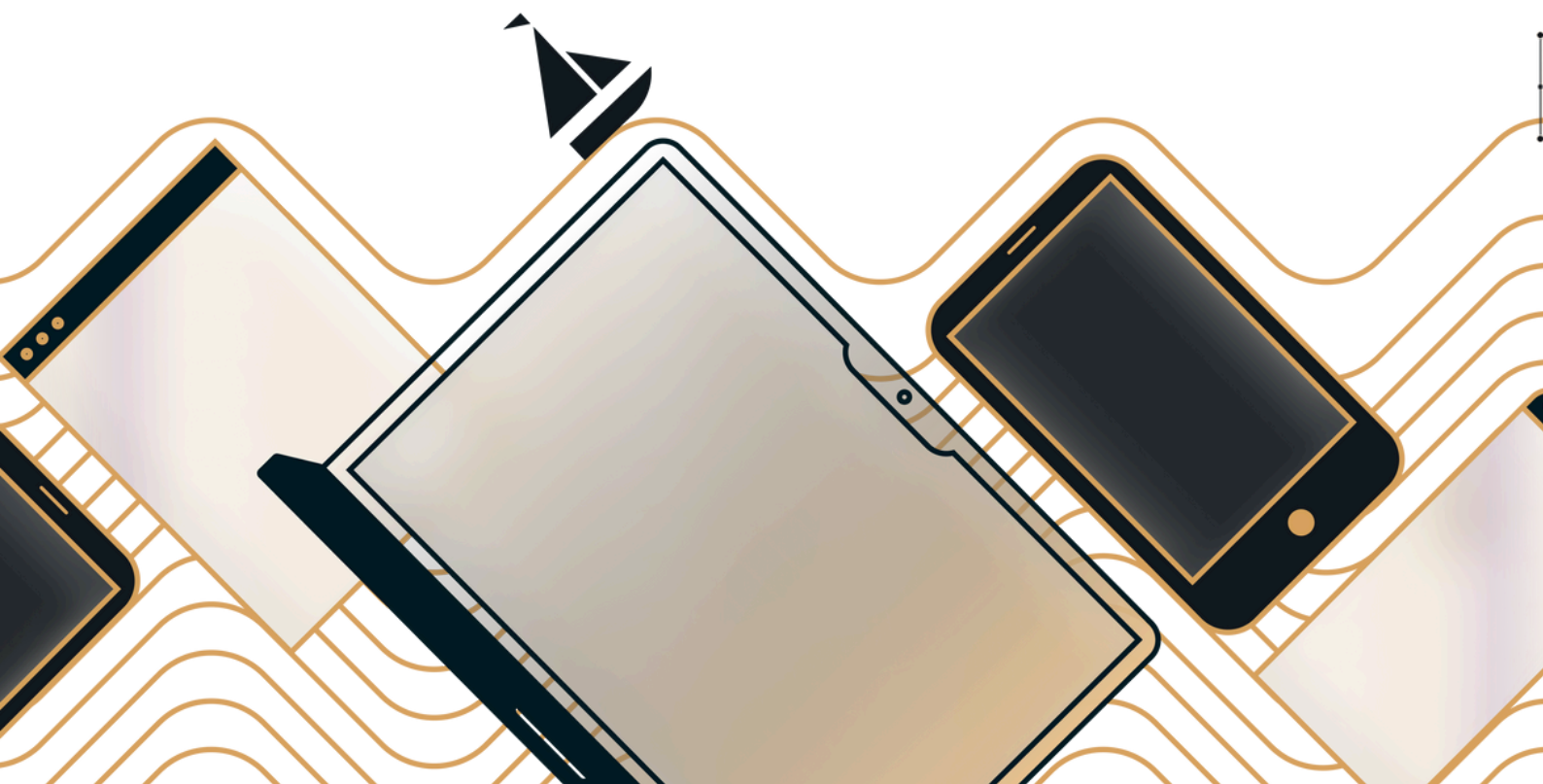


Daniel Kolitz

This report explores how those dynamics play out across core areas of product and technology strategy. From budget allocation to CMS tradeoffs, AI use, and talent sourcing, the sections that follow combine survey data with firsthand insight from product leaders.

About the Survey

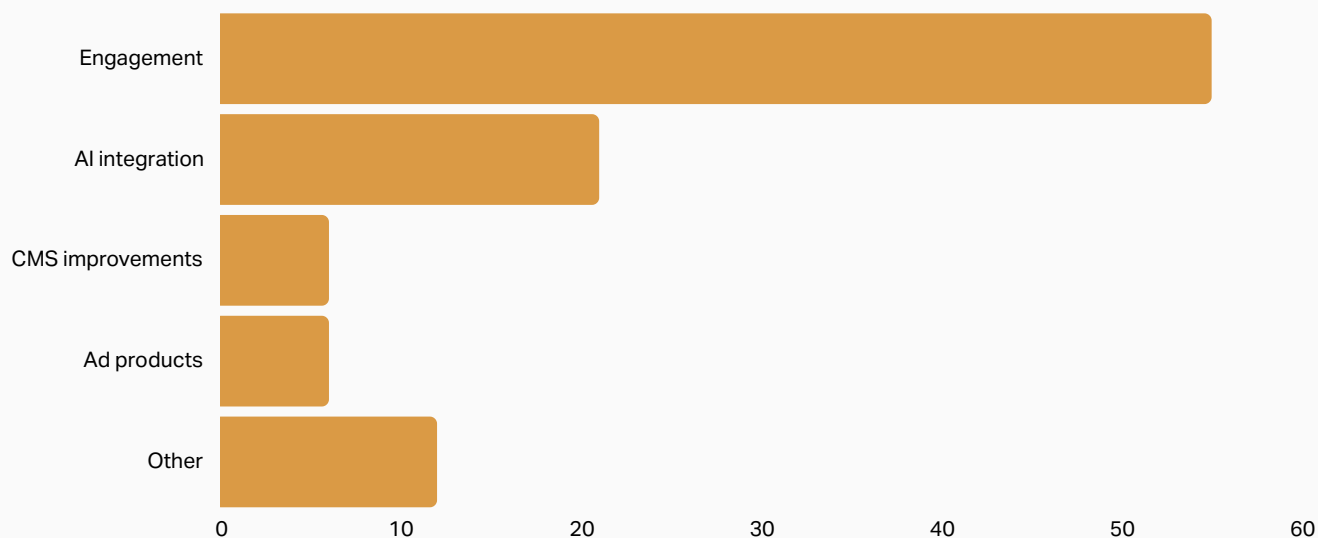
This research is based on a survey of 131 media professionals. We screened out respondents who do not work for publishing companies. The respondents are 43% in B2C and 18% in B2B, with the rest a combination. 57% are from companies doing under \$25 million in annual revenue while 26% are from companies with over \$100 million in annual revenue. We complemented the survey with extensive interviews with a half dozen product leaders at publishers.



The pivot to engagement

Audience engagement is the top product and technology priority for media organizations in 2025, and it's not particularly close. In our survey, audience engagement was named the top priority more than twice as often as the next most common answer (AI integration). This reflects broader shifts in traffic dynamics, as search referrals decline and organic social reach becomes increasingly unreliable. With traditional distribution channels weakening, product teams are being pushed to deepen direct relationships with readers and find new ways to deliver repeatable value.

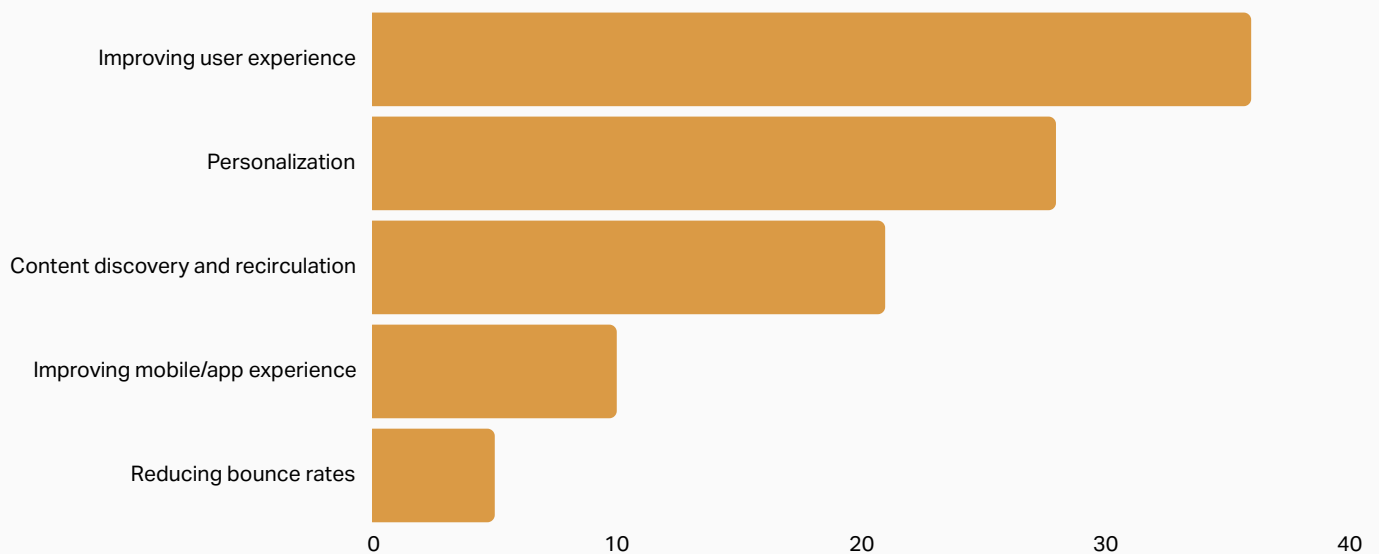
Top product and technology priorities for 2025



The shift underway is plain in interviews with product executives, and presents a familiar paradox: You have to construct the airplane as you fly it.

- 55% of respondents identified audience engagement as their top priority, more than twice the number who selected AI or CMS improvements

Top tactics to drive audience engagement



- CMS improvements, while not the top priority overall, were more frequently cited by small and mid-size publishers as a limiting factor in their engagement work
- 64% of respondents said their CMS strategy was either hybrid or third-party
- 32% of respondents cited internal alignment as a key challenge in executing product strategy, further complicating efforts to build engagement-driven products

The shift to audience engagement has meant a greater focus on improving the user experience to build habit and ultimately loyalty.

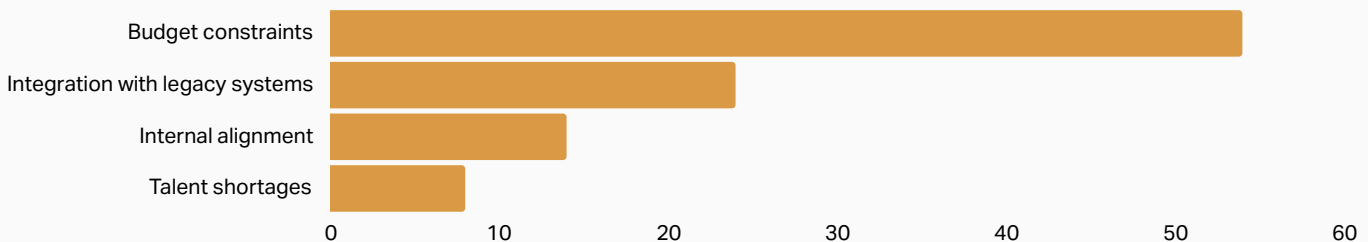
"We're definitely trying to create direct relationships with our users, and as a byproduct of that, deepen our relationships and drive engagement," said Adam McClean, Chief Product Officer at Dotdash Meredith, which recently rolled out a new TikTok-style app for People. Dotdash Meredith has 65 people working on the app, according to CEO Neil Vogel.

Innovation is underfunded

At the same time, media companies are struggling to fund the kinds of forward-looking product initiatives that might deepen this engagement. Nearly half of respondents allocate less than 10 percent of their total budget to product and technology, and most of that is dedicated to maintaining existing systems. As one executive said, "We invest just enough to stay behind."

This hits on a core challenge for publishers: They know they have fallen woefully behind on tech capabilities, but are constrained in spending by limited budgets and general industry contraction. Businesses have gone from cosplaying as tech companies to underinvesting in their own infrastructure.

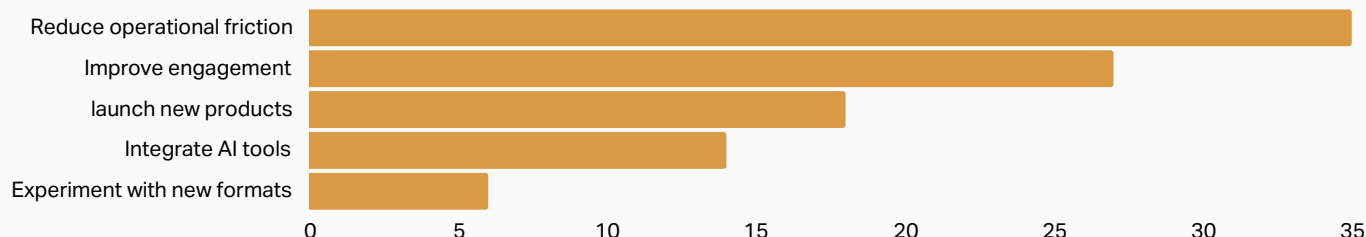
Biggest challenges in executing product strategy



- 45% of survey participants dedicate under 10% of their budget to product and tech
- Budget constraints were the top challenge cited by respondents in executing their product strategy
- Only 8% of respondents allocate more than 60% of their tech budgets to innovation
- 54% of respondents said AI investment is increasing, but most use cases are still operational rather than strategic

Despite the rhetoric around innovation, most product teams are operating with a clear mandate: maintain stability, stretch existing resources, and make small bets with low risk.

Top drivers behind innovation investment



Several interviewees said they've had to pause or permanently shelve product experiments simply because there weren't enough people to run them. One publishing product executive described killing a "once-promising AI video initiative because his team didn't have the bandwidth to properly manage it. Another shared that product improvements are prioritized strictly by impact on business goals—if an initiative doesn't drive subscriptions or engagement in a measurable way, it doesn't make the cut.

Others pointed to the drag of infrastructure. "We're still spending most of our budget keeping things from breaking," one product exec said. In several cases, leaders described pushing back roadmap timelines by quarters—if not years—just to ensure that audience or monetization goals could stay on track. This dynamic has shifted the very definition of innovation. For many, it's not about building bold new features. It's about removing friction in CMS workflows, eliminating redundant tools, and making personalization feel less like a manual workaround.

"The biggest barrier that I had working for a giant legacy company is the legacy," said a publishing product executive. "They built their own CMS. All the tech was custom. I had a huge team, but I would say that so much of their effort was taken up in keeping the lights on. Maintenance. Incrementalism—incremental features that needed to be done. There was a risk aversion, a resistance to making big bets. For me, the best analogy is an ocean liner versus a speed boat."

Brian Alvey, chief technology evangelist for WordPress VIP, notes that simply keeping the trains running can overwhelm many publisher products and tech organizations. "They come [to WordPress VIP] for cheaper hosting. What they get is built-in DDoS protection, a giant CDN, and peace of mind."

The scarcity mindset

One interviewee came to a buzzy new media start-up from a major legacy media conglomerate. The differences between the two were striking, and instructive. At the interviewee's former employer, fear ruled the day: it was impossible to make a decision without endlessly discussing the potential risks.

The interviewee identified a few reasons for this gridlock. One, a persistent fear of losing one's job in a rapidly shrinking media market. It's impossible to make a bold creative decision if short-term profit loss might get you fired. Secondly, the executives in charge aren't thinking beyond a three-to-five year time horizon—they're not thinking about where the companies are going to be in ten years, they're just trying to hit their numbers. And this goes double if we're talking about a public company.

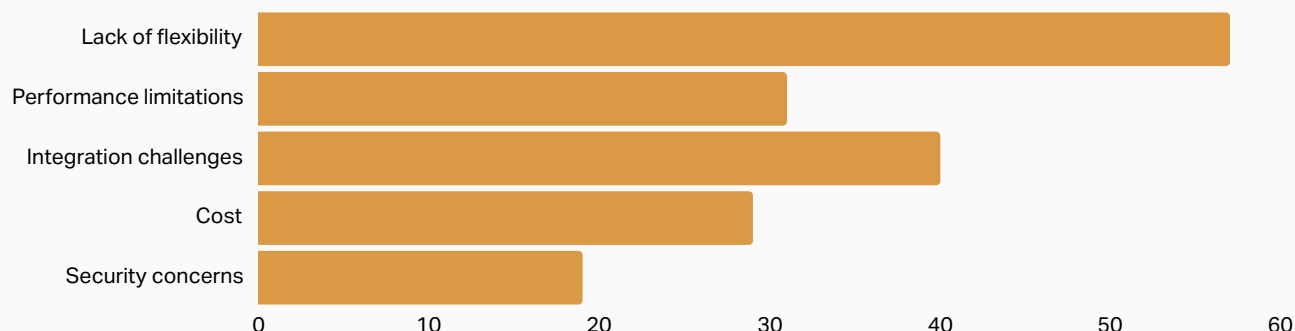
When the interviewee joined the smaller start-up, these concerns melted away. Part of this, of course, comes from having much less to lose: as the interviewee put it, "when you don't have anything to disrupt, it's easier to be brave."

At the same time—coming from a tech background—the interviewee found his new company's culture to be much more amenable to a move-fast-break-things mentality. Since taking on his new role, he has guided the company into doing things quickly and into taking more risks, and this approach has paid off handsomely, with the company growing 75% last year and continuing to grow this year. The analogy the interviewee used was an ocean liner as compared to a speedboat: one blazing across the water, the other laboriously navigating the tiniest turns.

CMS strategy is driven by necessity, not vision

The content management system is the heart of a publisher's product organization. It's where editorial workflows meet user experience, and where the technical foundation for experimentation, personalization, and monetization is either enabled—or blocked. While often seen as infrastructure, the CMS is a strategic asset. When it works well, it drives speed, adaptability, and innovation. When it doesn't, it becomes a bottleneck that slows everything from page speed to audience data capture.

Biggest challenges with current CMS or digital experience platform

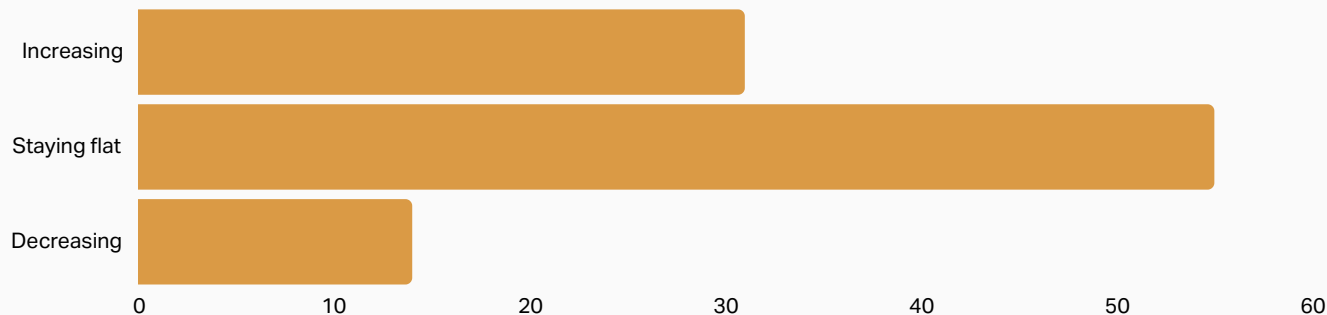


Yet for many publishers, the CMS still functions as a publishing pipe. Decisions about CMS architecture are often driven by operational simplicity rather than long-term flexibility. In our interviews, product leaders described platforms chosen for short-term needs that no longer support their evolving strategies.

"We're doing things today the system was never designed to do," one respondent said. As a result, teams are forced to choose between customizing brittle systems, layering on headless front ends, or building workarounds that limit scale.

- 63% of respondents use a third-party CMS; 23% use hybrid solutions; 15% maintain fully in-house platforms
- 55% cited flexibility as a top CMS challenge; 32% cited performance
- 47% of companies report rarely undergoing CMS migrations, suggesting avoidance of major platform changes
- 40% of respondents cite integration issues as a core CMS pain point

Trend in CMS investment across media companies



Others pointed to missed opportunities that stem directly from CMS limitations. “There’s so much we want to do around personalization and segmentation,” said one executive, “but it all gets slowed down by the plumbing.” Several described having to layer third-party tools onto the CMS just to access basic user data or support sponsored content formats. As one product lead put it: “We’ve built a duct-tape version of what we actually need.”

Even companies with in-house CMS platforms acknowledge their systems can become liabilities. One product executive said their internally built stack gave them control but added weight. “Everything we do touches the CMS, so every improvement comes with dependencies,” he said. The result: even small updates can feel high risk, especially with lean teams.

“Media companies have decided that tech is no longer a differentiator,” said a publishing product leader. “There was a period of time—and I was guilty of this as anybody else—where media companies were like, I’m going to build my own CMS. I’m going to build a big tech team. I’m going to differentiate through tech. And I don’t think the ROI was entirely there.”

The case against the custom CMS

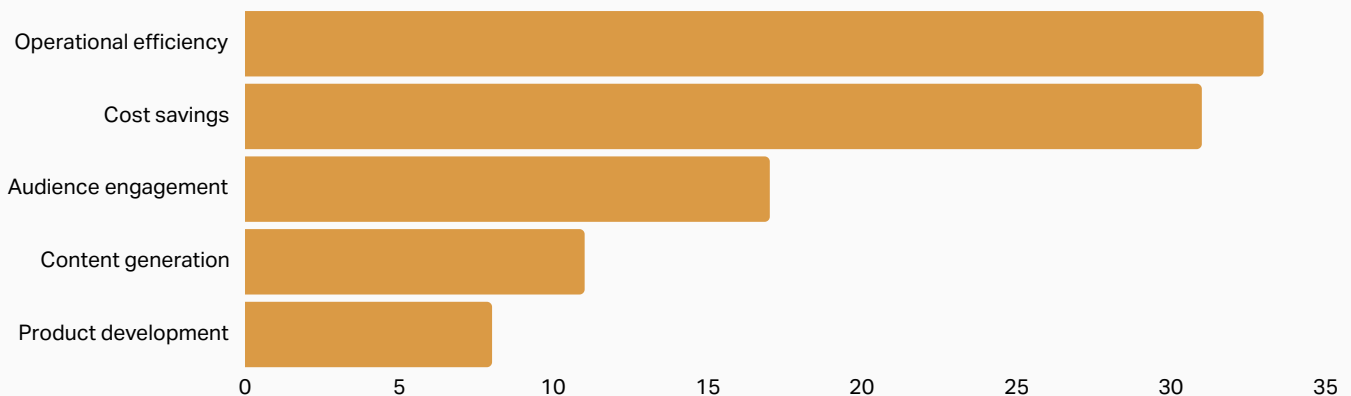
Publishing has long swung between building custom publishing platforms and using third-party infrastructure. For years, owning the stack was seen as a mark of seriousness—a way to build competitive advantage through tighter control. But in an era of lower budgets and leaner teams, the pendulum has swung back toward open source platforms. WordPress—particularly WordPress VIP—has become the default for publishers who no longer want to act like software companies. Even Vox Media, once proud of its custom-built Chorus platform, ultimately shut it down and moved to WordPress.

“There are people who built their own systems,” said Brian Alvey, Chief Technology Evangelist at WordPress VIP. “I was that person. But eventually, we all end up here.” For Alvey, the case against the custom CMS is as much philosophical as it is financial. “Why the hell would you want to run two companies and fight on two fronts?” he asked. “Your job is to survive long enough to find the next great revenue stream. Why burn cycles maintaining tech you can outsource?”

Alvey argues that modern CMS strategy is less about uniformity and more about flexible differentiation. “It’s not that you’re all using the same thing,” he said. “It’s infinitely customizable. But it’s also supported, tested, and ready for whatever comes next.”

AI is providing tactical, not strategic, leverage

Biggest opportunities AI presents for media organizations

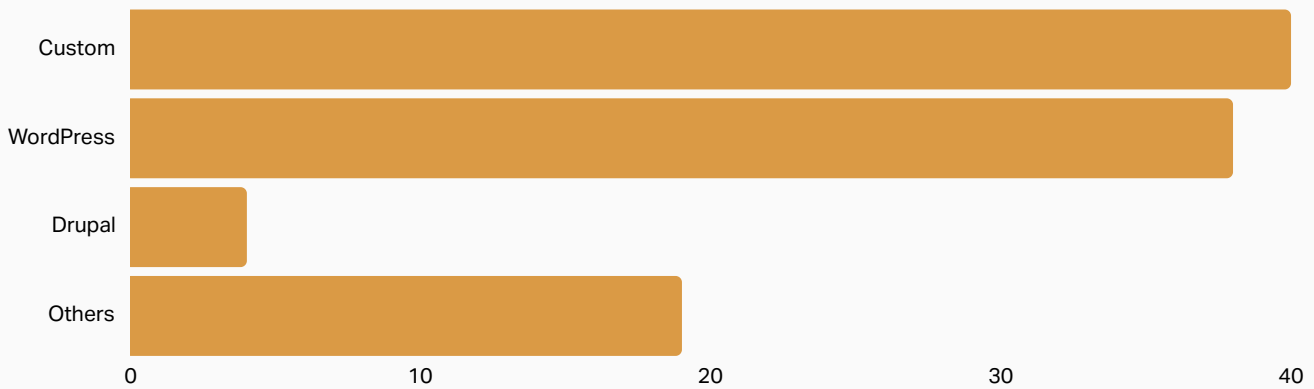


This industry-wide reconception of CMS is happening in tandem with deep internal deliberations around AI, which is already reshaping how the media business works. But despite increasing adoption, AI remains mostly confined to tactical functions—automating internal workflows, supporting content planning, and assisting in audience segmentation. Editorial integration remains largely off-limits, both culturally and strategically.

- 58% said their organizations were prepared for AI
- 83% of respondents said their organization is increasing investment in AI
- 61% reported using AI for automation and workflow improvements
- 58% are using it to assist with content creation or ideation—not to publish directly
- 42% said they are using AI for audience insights or segmentation
- Only 18% of companies are currently blocking AI crawlers; 42% are still evaluating their approach

In interviews, product leaders described a clear boundary: using AI to increase efficiency without letting it influence core content.

Perceived risks of AI adoption in media organizations



"We use AI to help with brainstorming, workflows, and CMS productivity," said McClean of Dotdash Meredith. "But we'll never use it to write content." That distinction reflects a broader sentiment: AI can save time and reduce friction, but it hasn't yet earned trust as a creative or strategic tool.

Several teams said AI is especially useful in environments where lean staff must deliver at scale. At one B2B publisher, a product executive described using AI to repurpose evergreen content, draft outreach emails, and generate summaries for internal reports. "It's not magic," he said, "but it helps us move faster."

Others see AI as an input—not a solution. "It's great for getting unstuck," said one executive. "But it's not making strategic decisions for us." Even where tools like ChatGPT are used, they tend to be sandboxed—used by individuals, not integrated into systems. Several product leads noted that their biggest challenge wasn't adoption, but governance. Without clear internal policies, experimentation happens inconsistently and with uneven oversight.

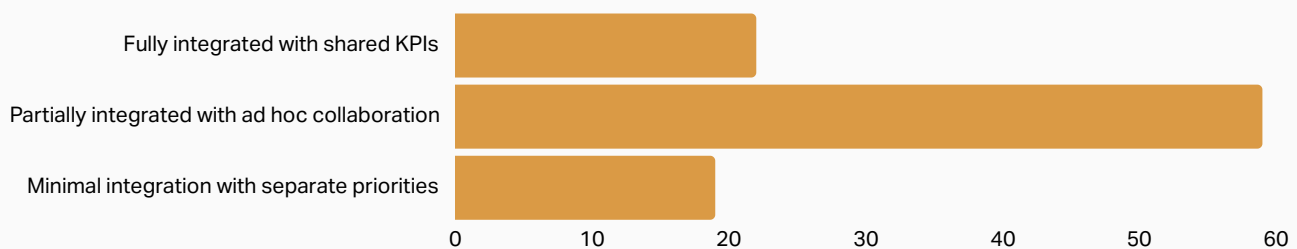
The one area where AI is driving organizational change is operational efficiency. Teams are using it to reduce repetitive tasks, accelerate production timelines, and support experimentation without hiring. Still, most see it as a supplement, not a replacement.

"There's no AI strategy," said one executive. "There's just trying to do more with what we have."

Product and tech strategy is fragmented

One of the clearest structural challenges for media product teams—in AI integration and elsewhere—is that no one truly owns the full picture. Product, tech, editorial, data, audience, and revenue often operate in parallel, with competing priorities and overlapping responsibilities. This fragmentation leads to reactive decision-making, slow execution, and diluted accountability.

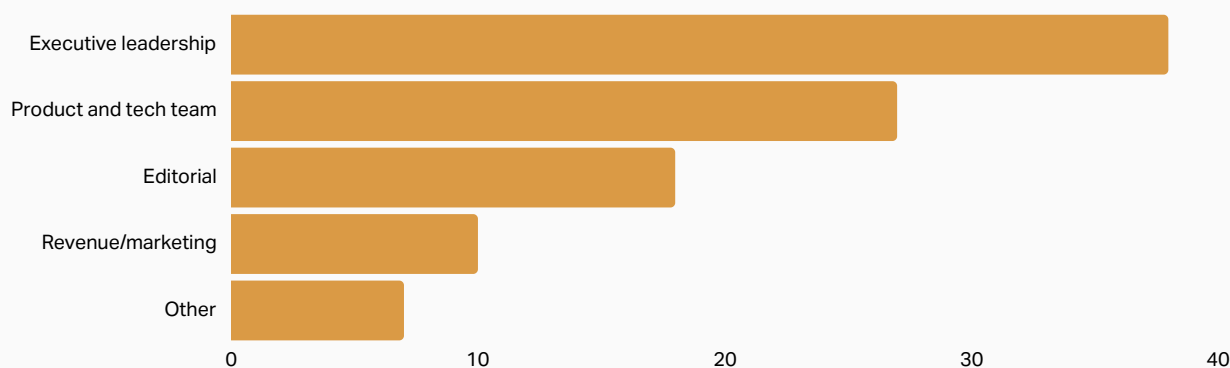
Integration of product teams with editorial and revenue teams



Instead of centralized product strategy, many organizations rely on informal collaboration across departments. In practice, that means roadmaps get shaped by whichever function has the loudest voice or the most urgent deliverables. While some teams are moving toward more integrated structures—with shared KPIs and cross-functional planning—most are still operating in silos.

- 22% of respondents said their teams are fully integrated with shared KPIs
- 56% cited resource constraints as the top challenge in aligning product and business strategy
- 27% said product and tech teams hold the most influence over strategic decisions
- 59% said their organization has only partial collaboration across departments

Who owns product strategy inside media organizations



In interviews, leaders described the friction this creates. “Everyone thinks they’re in charge of the audience,” said one executive, “so no one really is.” At many organizations, product teams are tasked with building solutions for goals they don’t set—often without the authority to prioritize trade-offs. “We’re responsible for outcomes but don’t own the inputs,” one respondent said.

Adam McClean of Dotdash Meredith described their model as a counter to that dynamic. Product leaders are embedded in each brand and roll up to a general manager who is accountable for editorial, audience, and revenue. “That model gives us clear ownership and focus,” McClean said. Others acknowledged they’re not there yet, but see the need to move in that direction.

The result of fragmented ownership isn’t just inefficiency. When editorial, revenue, and product aren’t aligned, initiatives stall or get watered down. Several executives noted that the projects with the highest impact were those with clear, cross-functional ownership from the start.

Others point to scarcity, fear-based mindsets holding back tech development at large publishers.

“They’re scared. If you look at the biggest media companies they used to make so much money, but they’re shrinking. The people who have been there for years are scared of losing their job and not being able to find another one. They’re scared of making a mistake that would cause them to lose more money at a faster pace. And they’re scared of disrupting themselves.”

Barriers to innovation

One interviewee spoke to his company's struggles in branching into new formats. For most of its existence, his company had done one specific thing for one specific audience: namely, text-based posts for niche marketing professionals. That is what his staff had been hired and trained to do—and it wasn't going to cut it anymore.

And so this interviewee began to discuss the possibility of shifting some of his company's limited resources towards podcasts. As he put it: "if you don't follow the audience to where they're consuming content—you're just done, right?"

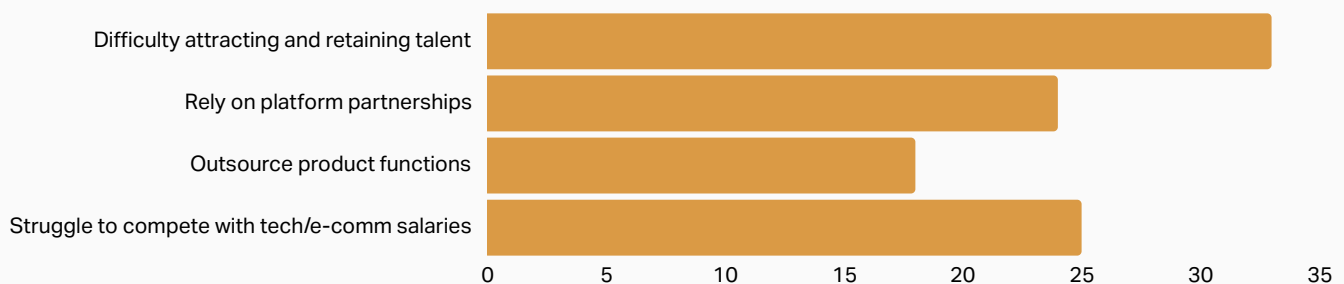
But the initiative was met with resistance. Part of the problem was that this interviewee's sales team was hung up on older metrics of success—most prominently, the ability to sell guaranteed leads. Podcasts can take an extraordinarily long time to build an audience—upwards of 18 to 24 months (and that's assuming they ever build an audience at all). In the meantime, the interviewee would need to justify allocating limited resources to content it would be near-impossible to monetize in the short-term.

Eventually, the interviewee landed on attempting a trial run—a single season consisting of nine episodes. In the process, the interviewee learned a lot. One thing he learned was that his audience absolutely does have an appetite for this content, assuming it's done well. Another thing he learned was that there are worthy goals out there beyond short-term monetization—for instance, building relationships. As he put it: "The thing we missed was that we can use these platforms to build relationships with people. 'I'm not going to do a podcast because I can't figure out the ad revenue model' is an insane thing to say, and only somebody who's a lifetime media person would say it."

Talent is a constraint

Talent remains one of the biggest barriers to innovation in media—but the challenge isn't just hiring more people. It's about finding the right skill sets, sourcing efficiently, and adapting to the reality that traditional publishing roles don't always align with the needs of modern product teams. With budgets flat and headcount limited, companies are rethinking where they hire from and what roles truly need to be in-house.

Talent and resourcing challenges in media product teams



Product leaders across the board said they struggle to find talent that combines technical fluency, business awareness, and editorial empathy. And when they do find it, compensation is often a limiting factor. That's led many to look outside the publishing industry for talent—or bypass headcount altogether in favor of platform partnerships and outsourced support.

- 33% of respondents reported that attracting and retaining product and technology talent is a top organizational challenge
- 18% of organizations said they are actively outsourcing product functions
- 24% said they rely on platform partnerships to supplement internal tech capacity

Executives repeatedly noted that traditional publishing orgs struggle to compete with tech and e-commerce companies for product talent. Several interviewees described using global or contract talent to fill skill gaps.

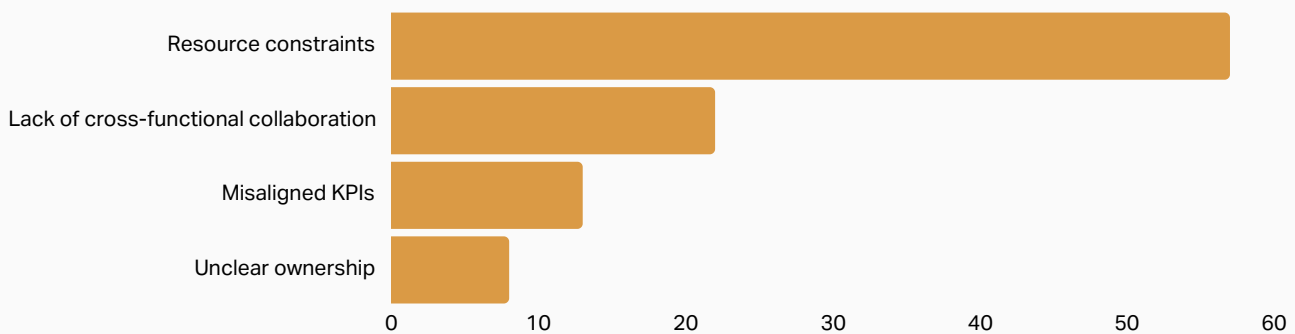
One product executive said they've had success hiring from outside the media industry—particularly in consumer tech and SaaS. "We need people who understand growth mechanics," he said, "not just how to manage editorial roadmaps." Another emphasized the advantages of building on a third-party publishing platform to cover more ground: "It gives us access to infrastructure and capabilities we couldn't afford to build ourselves."

Several respondents described shifting from in-house builds to trusted platforms not just for cost reasons, but because they couldn't staff the support required to maintain their own systems. "We weren't just over budget—we were overmatched," one executive said. Another explained that product innovation stalled until they hired a PM with no publishing experience but a deep understanding of experimentation and performance marketing.

"Developers are expensive," said a product executive. "Tech people are expensive. You want the A talent, but media companies pay for less than that, and they end up with B and C talent. They're not going to attract the guys who work at Google."

The more with less imperative

Biggest challenge in aligning product with tech and business objectives

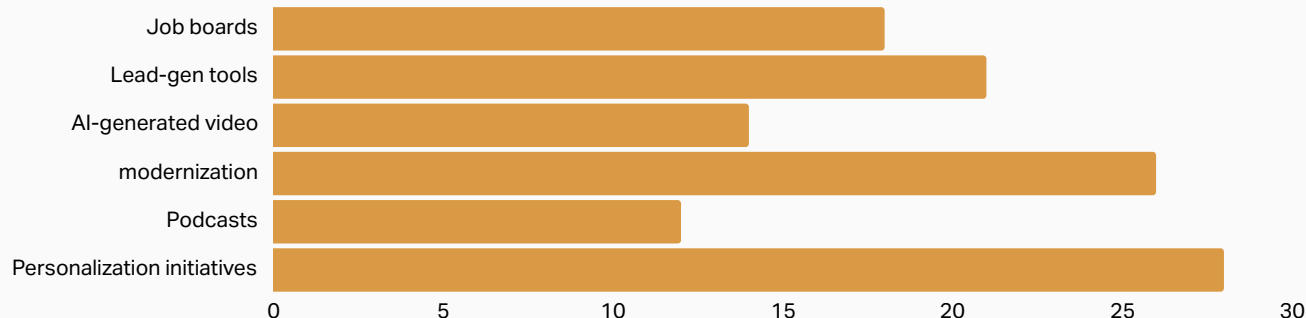


For product leaders in media, 2025 is not about scaling—it's about survival through prioritization. The cost pressure facing publishers has intensified with the growing complexity of tech stacks, the sprawl of audience channels, and heightened expectations around product performance. Against that backdrop, teams are being forced to make harder, faster decisions about what no longer deserves time, attention, or resources.

This isn't just about cutting costs. It's about cutting features, shelving ideas, and saying no to projects that don't directly contribute to revenue, retention, or strategic clarity. Several product leaders described a deliberate process of pruning—evaluating what's live, what's being maintained, and what no longer justifies its weight on the roadmap. As one executive put it, "There are things we've had to kill, not because they didn't work—but because we didn't have the team to keep pushing them."

Examples include cutting jobs boards, ineffective lead-gen tools, and AI-generated video experiments

Product features and initiatives cut or deprioritized



- 32% of respondents say their CMS lacks innovation, limiting opportunities to test new formats
- Interviewees described pulling entire feature sets that were not actively used or failed to drive revenue
- Others emphasized shifting attention toward podcasting, video, and direct audience tools that build relationships, not just traffic
- 26% said they had sunset or deprioritized at least one major initiative in the past 12 months due to bandwidth constraints
- 18% reported cutting features or tools that failed to drive measurable engagement or revenue

Several product leaders described eliminating tools like jobs boards, underused lead-gen products, and experimental content formats that never found traction.

The B2B publishing executive described running a feature audit to identify tools and products that added more complexity than value. “We were spending time maintaining things no one was using,” he said. “So we started cutting—and haven’t looked back.” That shift opened up capacity to focus on higher-leverage formats like video and event-based content.

One product executive noted that focus doesn’t mean playing it safe—it means being honest about capacity. “We’d love to do more with personalization,” he said, “but that requires a level of data infrastructure and product maturity we’re not going to fake. So we’re doubling down on the core experiences we know we can own.”

Multiple interviewees said that ruthless prioritization has become a cultural discipline. One executive framed it this way: “We ask: If we turned this off today, would anyone notice? If the answer’s no, it goes on the [kill] list.”

Taking the pragmatic path

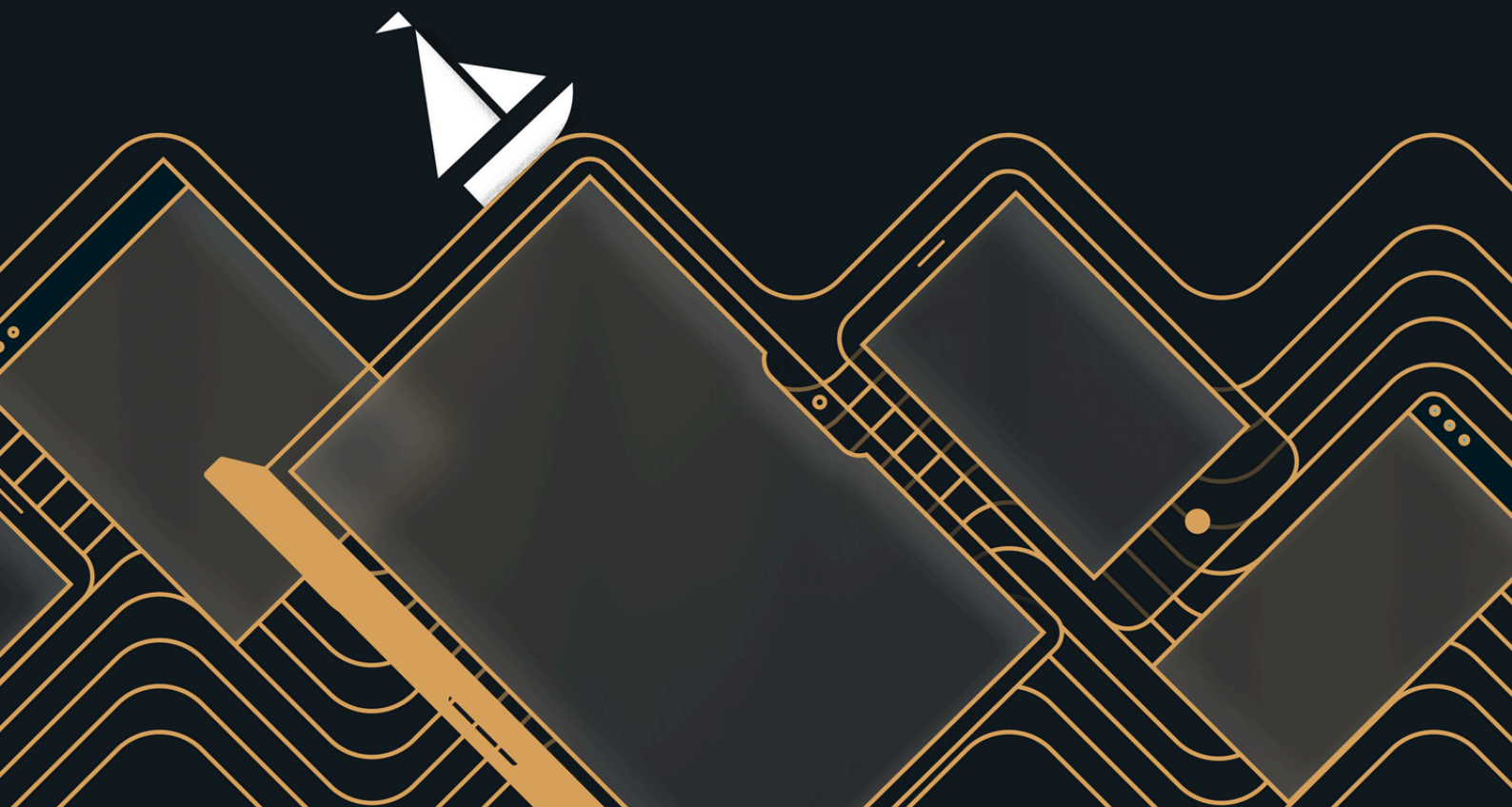
The era of “more with less” is no longer a temporary phase; it’s the new operating environment for media product teams. The days of large platform subsidies and speculative tech bets are over. What remains is a more grounded mandate: deliver meaningful improvements to the user experience, create tools that support monetization, and align cross-functional teams around what really matters.

The product leaders in this report are trying to build the right thing at the right time, with teams that are stretched, systems that are brittle, and budgets that are under constant pressure. The result is a discipline of ruthless prioritization. What gets shipped, what gets cut, and what gets paused are all decisions filtered through a new lens: does this actually move the business forward?

This pragmatism doesn’t mean giving up on ambition. The teams that are gaining traction are those that have found alignment between what audiences value and what the business can support. They’re not building flashy features to impress stakeholders—they’re building useful products that deepen engagement, capture first-party data, and support sustainable revenue.

Third-party platforms play a critical role in making this possible. From CMS infrastructure to audience analytics, external partners are increasingly embedded in product roadmaps—not as vendors, but as strategic enablers. The smartest organizations are not trying to do everything themselves. They are figuring out what they must own, what they can outsource, and how to move faster without breaking what’s already working.

This is not a story about transformation. It’s a story about traction. In 2025, the product organizations that succeed will be those that know where they’re going, understand what it takes to get there, and have the discipline to stay focused along the way.



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