

# From campaigns to programs

Influencer marketing used to run in bursts. Pick a moment, book some creators, run the posts, go quiet. In 2026 that model is being replaced by the always-on creator program, where creators sit at the center of the media plan year round. The shift is not a trend piece, it is in the spend data. Here is what the public numbers show, pulled from the IAB and others and cited, plus why an always-on program raises the stakes on who is actually on your roster.

**\$44B**

PROJECTED US CREATOR  
AD SPEND IN 2026

from \$37B in 2025

**+48%**

PROJECTED 2026  
GROWTH IN PAID  
AMPLIFICATION OF  
CREATOR CONTENT

**~50%**

US BUYERS WHO  
CALL CREATOR A  
"MUST BUY" FOR  
SOCIAL

**40%**

BUYERS RANKING  
OVERALL ROI AS  
THEIR TOP CREATOR  
KPI

**~75%**

BRANDS USING OR  
PLANNING AI FOR  
CREATOR TASKS

Headline figures: IAB 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report and IAB Annual Leadership Meeting 2026.  
Full sources listed below.

## The shift in one line

The IAB put it plainly: what was once campaign-based influencer marketing is evolving into always-on creator programs, with brands building dedicated teams and tools to manage the partnerships at scale. Creators have moved from something you tack onto a campaign at the end to something you build the campaign around from the start. That is a different operating model, which changes what you need underneath it.

## Six signals from the public record.

### 1 **Creator advertising is now a "core media channel," not an add-on.**

The IAB's 2025 Creator Economy report reclassified creator content as a core media channel that brands run with always-on strategies, rather than an experimental line item. When a channel graduates to core, it gets standing budget and standing process. (Source: IAB, 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report.)

### 2 **The spend backs it: \$37 billion in 2025, about \$44 billion in 2026.**

US creator ad spend reached roughly \$37 billion in 2025, growing 26% year over year, then is projected near \$44 billion in 2026. Channels growing this fast attract permanent teams, not one-off briefs. (Source: IAB.)

### 3 **Paid amplification of creator content is projected to grow 48% in 2026.**

The IAB projects paid amplification of creator content alone to grow about 48% in 2026. Brands are not just posting creator content, they are putting media weight behind it continuously, which is an always-on behavior by definition. (Source: IAB.)

### 4 **Half of US buyers now call creator a "must buy" for social.**

About 50% of US buyers now consider creator marketing a must buy for social, per the IAB, up from a posture where creators were tacked on at the end. Brands are starting with creators and building the story around them. (Source: IAB, via Beet.TV, IAB ALM 2026.)

### 5 **The goal moved from awareness to ROI.**

40% of buyers now rank overall ROI as their top KPI for creator campaigns, plus sales sits among the top goals alongside awareness. An always-on program is how brands chase ROI: you keep the best creators working rather than rebuilding a roster every quarter. (Source: IAB.)

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### **Brands are leaning on AI to run programs, though guarding the human part.**

About three in four brands are using or planning to use AI for creator tasks, yet 95% have concerns about it, with the top worry being loss of human connection. That tension is the whole game: use AI to run the program at scale, keep real human creators and real audiences at the center. (Source: IAB.)

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## **Why always-on raises the stakes on verification**

A one-off campaign built on a weak roster wastes one budget. An always-on program built on the same roster wastes budget every cycle, then compounds the damage as you scale the team and the spend around it. The move to programs makes the cost of an unverified creator recurring rather than one-time, which is exactly why verification stops being optional once you go always-on.

So the operating model has a prerequisite. Before you build standing process around a roster, make sure the roster is real: creators verified as genuine, with real engagement and, for a US brand, a genuinely US audience. Build the program on verified creators and the compounding works for you. Build it on inflated numbers and you have just automated the waste.

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## **Methodology and what this report is**

### WHAT THIS IS

An analysis that synthesizes public IAB data and industry reporting on the always-on shift into one argument, with our read on what it means for creator rosters. The framing is ours. The numbers are not.

### SOURCE STANDARD

We cite the IAB and named IAB executives directly, plus reputable trade press reporting on IAB findings. We excluded vendor studies from competing platforms to keep the data independently checkable.

### WHAT WE DID NOT DO

We used no private account data, nor did we generate any figure ourselves. Every statistic traces to a named public source you can verify.

### LIMITATIONS

The \$44 billion figure is a projection, plus the IAB spend number includes paid amplification, a broader scope than creator payments alone. We note scope where it matters.

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## Sources

1. IAB, 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report (US creator spend \$37B in 2025, +26% YoY; projected ~\$44B in 2026; paid amplification projected +48% in 2026; creator content as a "core media channel" run with always-on strategies; ~75% of brands using or planning AI for creator tasks; 95% have AI concerns, top concern loss of human connection; 40% rank ROI as top KPI).
2. IAB Annual Leadership Meeting 2026, remarks by Zoe Soon, VP Experience, IAB, as reported by Beet.TV (about 50% of US buyers now consider creator a "must buy" for social; brands starting with creators at the center rather than tacking them on).
3. IAB 2025 Internet Advertising Revenue Report, conducted by PwC (context on overall digital ad revenue and the shift toward performance channels).

*Figures are reported as published by the IAB and the named sources above as of June 2026. The \$44 billion figure is a projection and the IAB spend measure includes paid amplification of creator content. This page links to no competitor and reproduces no third-party report; it summarizes published figures with attribution for industry reference.*

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## Go deeper

An always-on program is only as good as the roster under it, which is the theme of [the creator verification gap](#). For the full market picture, see [The Verified Creator Report 2026](#).

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## About this content

Editorial, verification and review standards for this page.

### PUBLISHER

Published by **KALO IQ**, the US influencer marketing platform headquartered in Beverly Hills, California. Founded December 2015.

### VERIFICATION STANDARDS

Every creator on the **KALO IQ database** is hand-verified by our 15-person verification team before being listed. We exclude bots, fake-follower accounts and creators outside the US.

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