Clarvos

BENCHMARK REPORT

ORIGINAL RESEARCH · OCTOBER 2026

State of ad tech sprawl 2026

What 213 marketers told us about tool overload

The typical team runs about five tools a month and adds them almost twice as fast as it removes them. Here is what that costs you, and how to tell which tools earn their place.

5.2 tools

6 hrs a week

$34.5K a year

34% bad calls

SAMPLE

213 marketing and media professionals, 48% director level or above

FIELDED

October 9 to 12, 2026, online panel

PUBLISHED BY

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01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY · AT A GLANCE

Sprawl is a tax most teams pay without seeing it

The typical marketing team runs about five tools a month, and 43% run six or more. Teams add tools almost twice as fast as they remove them. That sprawl has a cost you can measure.

34%

made a delayed or wrong decision in the last 12 months because two tools showed conflicting data. Another 14% weren't sure.

6 hrs

a week moving data between tools and reconciling numbers. At $115 an hour, that is about $34,500 per team per year.

18% → 60%

The bad-decision rate climbs from teams running 0-2 tools to teams running 9 or more. The cost rises with stack size.

85%

use at least one AI tool. 29% of those teams adopted one without full vetting, and 11% vetted none of them.

27%

reversed or regretted an AI tool purchase in the past year. The top reason: the tool didn't work in practice, not a misleading pitch.

47%

are confident their stack is the right size. Yet 60% of teams losing 8+ hours a week still rate their stack a 4 or 5.

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey, fielded Oct 9 to 12, 2026. n=209 unless noted.

02 METHODOLOGY · WHO ANSWERED

Read every figure as a respondent's estimate

This report is built on self-reported survey data, not measured tool usage or performance data. Nearly half the people who answered run marketing at director level or above.

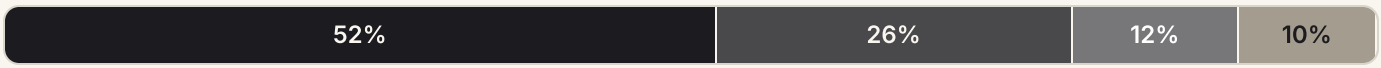
213
marketing and media professionals

209
answered the core stack questions

197
completed the full survey

±6.8
pt margin of error at 95% (n=209)

Role n=213



Marketing or performance media manager 52% · Director of marketing 26% · CMO, VP or head of marketing 12% · Founder or CEO 10%

Company size (employees) n=197



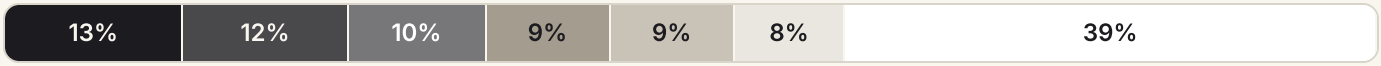
1-49 31% · 50-199 22% · 200-999 21% · 1,000-4,999 16% · 5,000+ 9%

Annual marketing and advertising budget n=197



Under $250K 46% · $250K-$2.9M 34% · $5M or more 15% · Not sure 5%

Industry n=197



Retail and e-commerce 13% · Agency 12% · Professional services 10% · Technology and software 9% · Media and publishing 9% · Non-profit and government 8% · All others 39%

Fielded October 9 to 12, 2026. Respondents came from an online panel, not a probability sample, so the margin of error is a reference point rather than a strict guarantee. Subgroups have wider margins. Averages use the midpoint of each answer range; open-ended ranges (15+ hours, 13+ tools) use conservative floors.

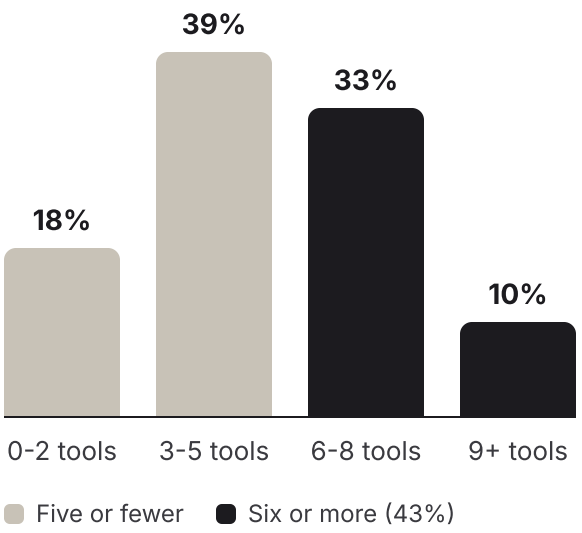
Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey, fielded Oct 9 to 12, 2026.

03 FINDING 1 · STACK GROWTH

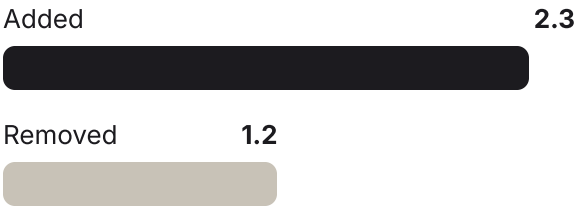
Stacks grow nearly twice as fast as they're pruned

The most common answer was 3-5 tools (39%), but the tail is long. **43% of teams use six or more tools in a typical month**, and 10% use nine or more. Using bucket midpoints, the average is about 5.2 tools.

Tools used in a typical month
% of teams, n=209



Tools added vs removed, last 12 months
Average per team



66% grew their stack on net

52% removed nothing at all

85% added at least one tool

That growth has a price. As Part 2 of this series argued ("Tool sprawl is a tax"), each new tool brings recurring costs in reconciliation, context-switching and data conflicts. The next page shows those costs rising steadily with stack size.

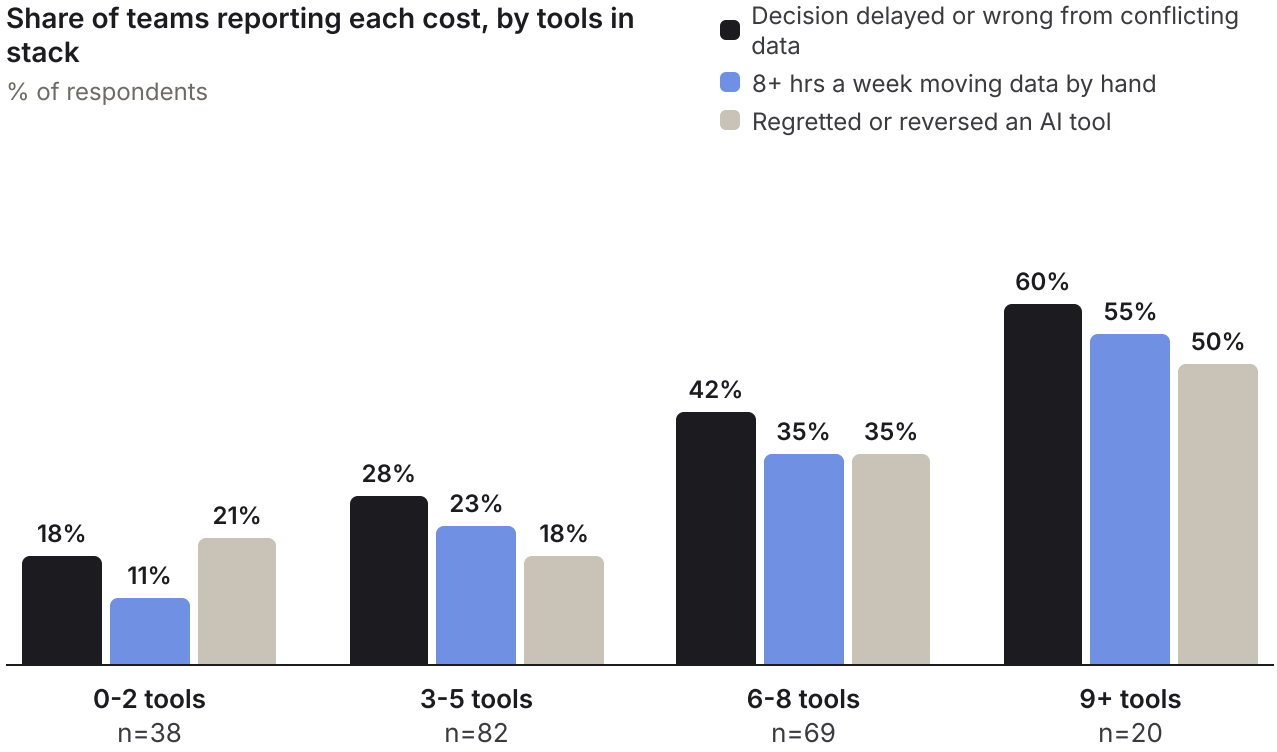
Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey, fielded Oct 9 to 12, 2026. 9+ combines the 9-12 and 13+ answers.

03 FINDING 1 · THE SPRAWL TAX

Every cost rises with stack size

Share of teams reporting each cost, by tools in stack

% of respondents



Tools in stack	Bad decision	8+ hrs a week	Avg hrs a week	Regretted AI tool
0-2 tools (n=38)	18%	11%	2.8	21%
3-5 tools (n=82)	28%	23%	5.6	18%
6-8 tools (n=69)	42%	35%	7.4	35%
9+ tools (n=20)	60%	55%	8.9	50%

46% vs 25%

Teams with six or more tools are nearly twice as likely to report a bad decision caused by conflicting data.

39% vs 19%

They're also twice as likely to spend 8+ hours a week reconciling. Yet many still say their stack is the right size (Finding 5).

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey. The 9+ group is small (n=20); read it directionally.

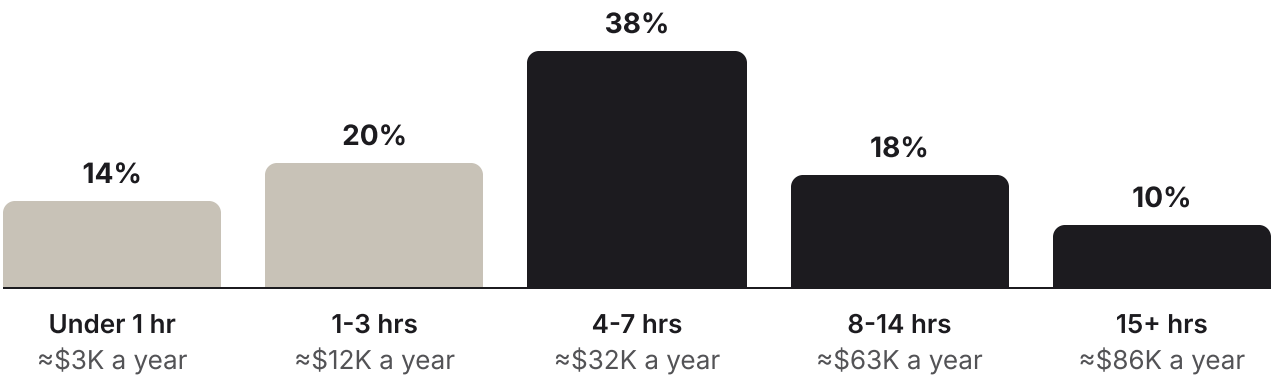
04 FINDING 2 · THE HIDDEN HOURS COST

Reconciling data costs the average team about $34,500 a year

Two-thirds of teams (66%) spend four or more hours a week moving data between tools or reconciling numbers across platforms. 28% spend eight or more, and 10% spend 15 or more.

Weekly team hours spent moving and reconciling data

% of teams, n=209



Hours a week	Teams	At $115/hr	At $50/hr
Under 1 hr	14%	~$2,900	~$1,300
1-3 hrs	20%	~$11,500	~$5,000
4-7 hrs	38%	~$31,600	~$13,800
8-14 hrs	18%	~$63,300	~$27,500
15+ hrs	10%	~$86,300+	~$37,500+
Average (~6.0 hrs)		**~$34,500**	**~$15,000**

HOW WE PRICED AN HOUR

$115 is the 2025 median wage for advertising, promotions and marketing managers, $79.70 an hour per the BLS, adjusted for benefits. Wages are about 70% of total employer compensation (BLS ECEC, June 2026), so $79.70 ÷ 0.70 ≈ $115. We assume 50 working weeks.

The $50 column covers teams where coordinators or analysts do the reconciling. Even then, the average team spends about $15,000 a year on work that adds no value.

31 FTEs
1,260 combined hours a week across respondents

2.8 → 8.9
hrs a week, from 0-2 tools to 9+ tools

4.2 → 7.5
hrs a week, from under 50 employees to 5,000+

Cost line: bucket midpoint (15 for 15+) × 50 weeks × hourly rate. Hours are team-level, not per person.

05 FINDING 3 · AI VETTING

AI adoption is ahead of AI vetting

85% of teams use at least one AI tool. 41% use three or more, and 8% use six or more. We asked how many of those tools were fully vetted before purchase, rather than adopted after a demo or sales pitch.

AI tools in use per team

all teams, n=209



None · 1-2 · 3-5 · 6+

How many AI tools were fully vetted

AI-tool users, n=177



Vetted none · Vetted some, clearly not all · Unclear from answers · Vetted every AI tool

Fully vetted means a technical evaluation, a data policy review and a trial on real data. "Unclear" answers overlap the team's AI tool range: a team with 3-5 AI tools that vetted 3 may or may not have vetted everything.

29%+

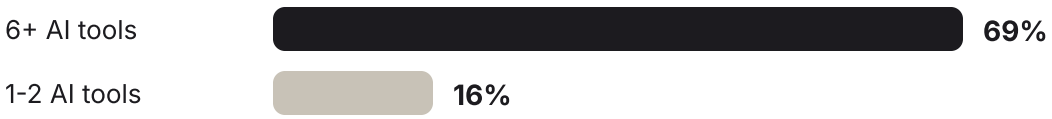
of AI-using teams adopted at least one AI tool without full vetting. The real share is likely higher.

1 in 3

AI tools in use (about 32%) never went through full vetting, estimated from bucket midpoints.

The gap widens with adoption

Teams admitting at least one AI tool was adopted without full vetting



This is the risk Part 1 of this series described: AI tools added after a demo, with the evaluation skipped.

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey. AI-tool users n=177, ±7.4 pts. Shares may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

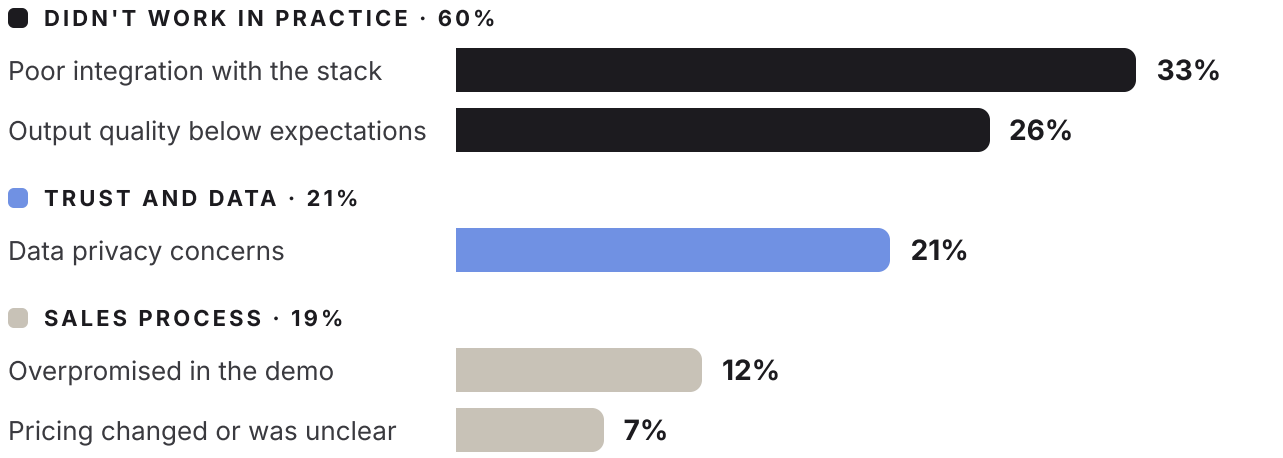
06 FINDING 4 · BUYER'S REMORSE

Most AI regret comes from how a tool works inside your stack

27% of teams reversed or regretted an AI tool purchase in the last 12 months (29% among teams that use AI tools). Here is the primary reason they gave.

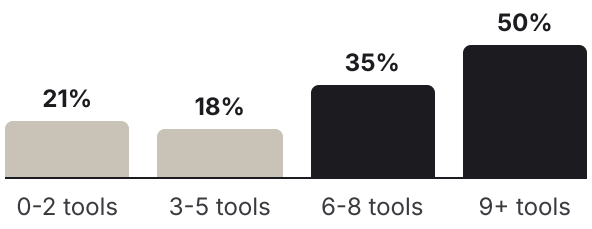
Primary reason for reversing an AI tool purchase

% of regretters, n=57



3 in 5 cite integration failure or poor output. Only 19% cite the demo or pricing. Those are exactly the problems a trial on your own data would surface before you buy.

Regret rises with stack size



Partial vetting, more regret

35% partial vetting

27% vetted all or most

Read this gap directionally given the small base.

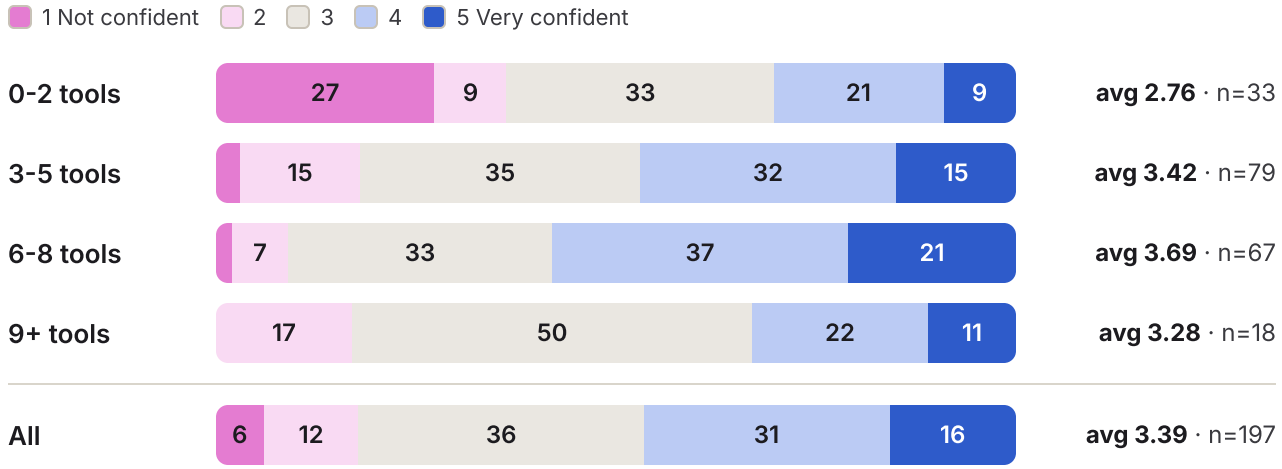
Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey. Small base (n=57); ±13 pts margin of error.

07 FINDING 5 · CONFIDENCE

Confidence is lukewarm, and it doesn't match the costs

On a 1 to 5 scale, the average score is 3.39. **Only 47% are confident** (4 or 5) their stack is the right size. 36% are on the fence, and 18% are not confident.

Confidence the stack is the right size, by tool count



1 = too many logins and lacks capabilities. 5 = not too sprawling and meets needs.

AN INVERTED U, NOT A STRAIGHT LINE

Confidence is lowest at 0-2 tools (2.76), where many teams say their tools lack what they need. It peaks at 6-8 tools (3.69) and falls again at 9+ (3.28). The overall correlation is weak and slightly positive (Spearman ρ = 0.17).

The most confident group, 6-8 tools, still pays

42% made a delayed or wrong decision

35% spend 8+ hours a week reconciling

35% regretted an AI tool

60% of teams spending 8+ hours a week on reconciliation still rate their stack a 4 or 5, and so do 47% of teams that made a bad call from conflicting data. Teams judge a stack by its capabilities, not its overhead, so the sprawl tax never shows up in the rating.

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey. n=197, ±7.0 pts. 9+ group n=18; read directionally.

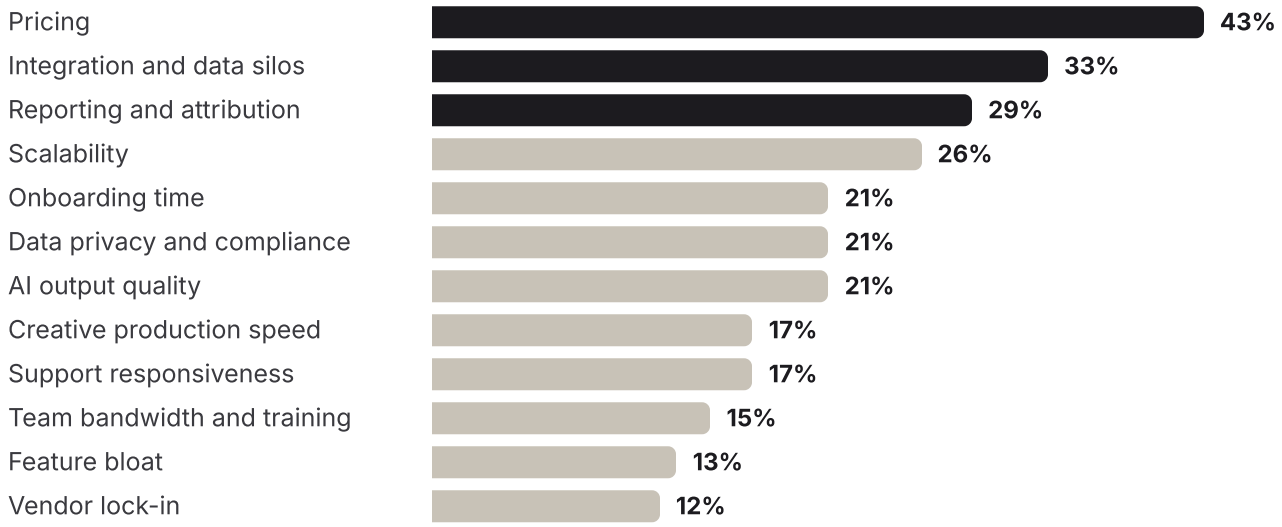
08 WHAT THIS MEANS · WHERE IT HURTS

Pricing tops the pain list, integration follows

Pricing is the most cited pain point in the current stack, at 43%. Integration and data silos (33%) and reporting and attribution (29%) follow close behind.

Biggest pain points in the current stack

% selecting, multi-select, n=195



2 of 3 top pain points are about how your tools work together. Pricing shows up on the invoice. Integration and reporting problems show up as hours spent reconciling and calls made on conflicting data, and an audit can measure both before you cut anything.

Read the list as a ranking of where it hurts, not a measure of cost. The question allowed several answers, so shares add up to more than 100%.

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey, fielded Oct 9 to 12, 2026.

08 WHAT THIS MEANS · FOR BUYERS

Three moves that cut the sprawl tax

01 Vet before you buy

Integration failure and weak output caused 60% of AI tool regret, and both show up in a real-data trial. A demo shows what a tool can do. A trial shows what it does in your stack, with your data, next to your other tools. With 29%+ of AI-using teams skipping full vetting on at least one tool, evaluation is where most avoidable regret starts.

02 Audit before you consolidate

Teams add tools almost twice as fast as they remove them, and more than half removed nothing last year. Before you cut, measure the tax each tool adds: hours spent reconciling it, decisions it delayed, reports where its numbers disagree with another source. The 34% who made a bad call needed one source of truth more than fewer logins.

03 Don't trade capability for fewer logins

The least confident teams in this survey run the smallest stacks. The goal isn't the fewest tools. It's the smallest stack that still covers what your team needs and keeps its data consistent. A consolidation that saves licence fees but loses capability just moves the tax somewhere else.

THE PRACTICAL TEST FOR ANY NEW TOOL

Does it reduce the hours your team spends reconciling data, or add to them?

Has it been trialed on your real data?

Can you measure its effect on decisions, not just on features?

See how your next tool performs on your data before you spend a dollar on it.

Book a Demo →

Source: State of Ad Tech Sprawl 2026 survey, fielded Oct 9 to 12, 2026.