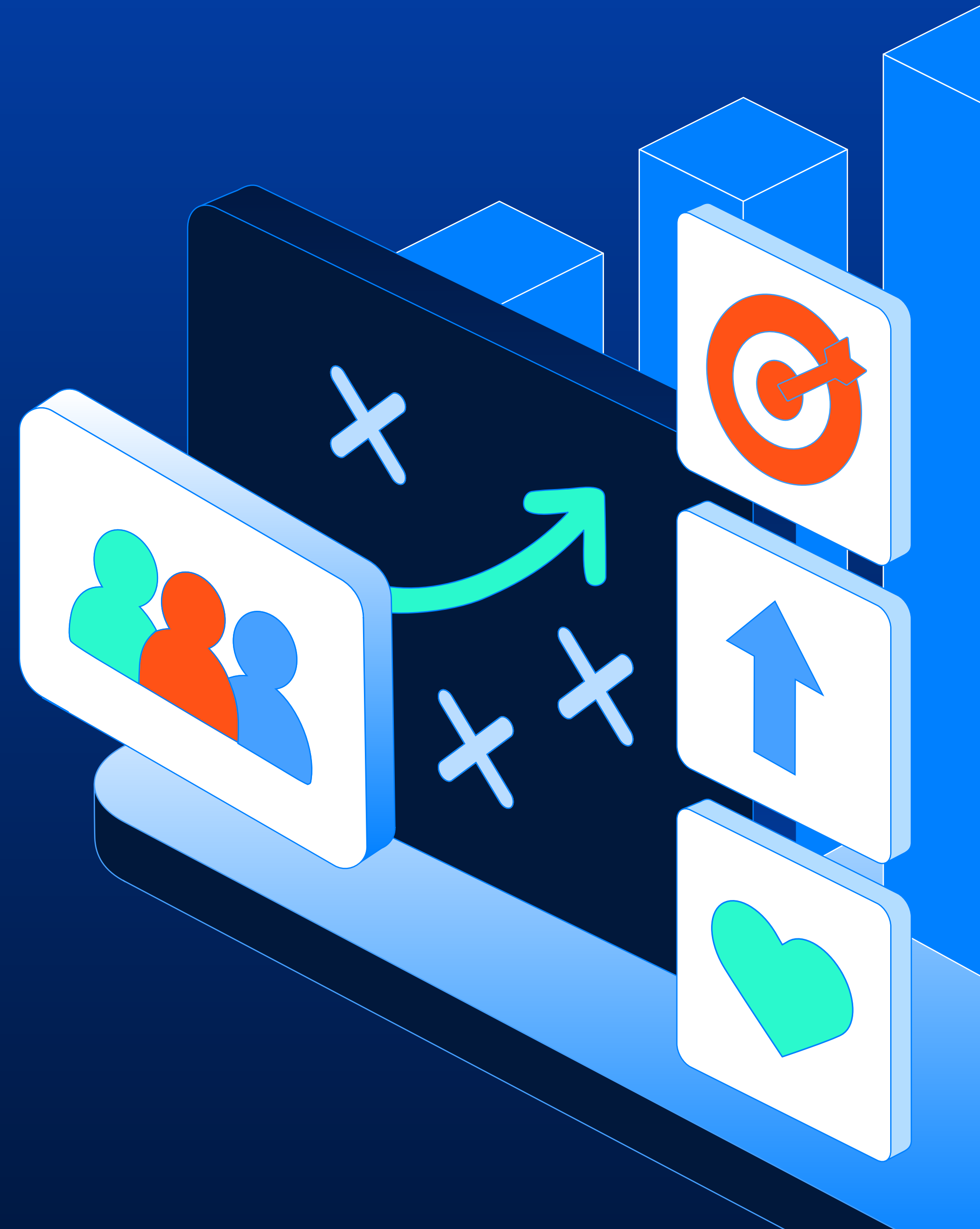


9 Strategies to Boost Acquisition, Engagement, and Loyalty



The media industry is no stranger to disruption. From the printing press to the television to the internet to AI, each innovation changed how audiences discover information, and each one felt existential to the media companies living through it. Despite the discomfort brought on by each transformation in the moment, the pattern has held every time: the format of discovery changes, but the underlying demand for trusted information does not.

As AI-generated search results and a shifting referral landscape put real pressure on audience acquisition, there's no question that a new playbook is necessary for 2026 and beyond. To help you understand the real stakes and opportunities brought on by these challenges, we used two years of Chartbeat data to map the entire reader lifecycle — from discovery to on-site engagement all the way through to the ultimate goal of loyalty.

What's Inside

Findings on the decline of search referrals

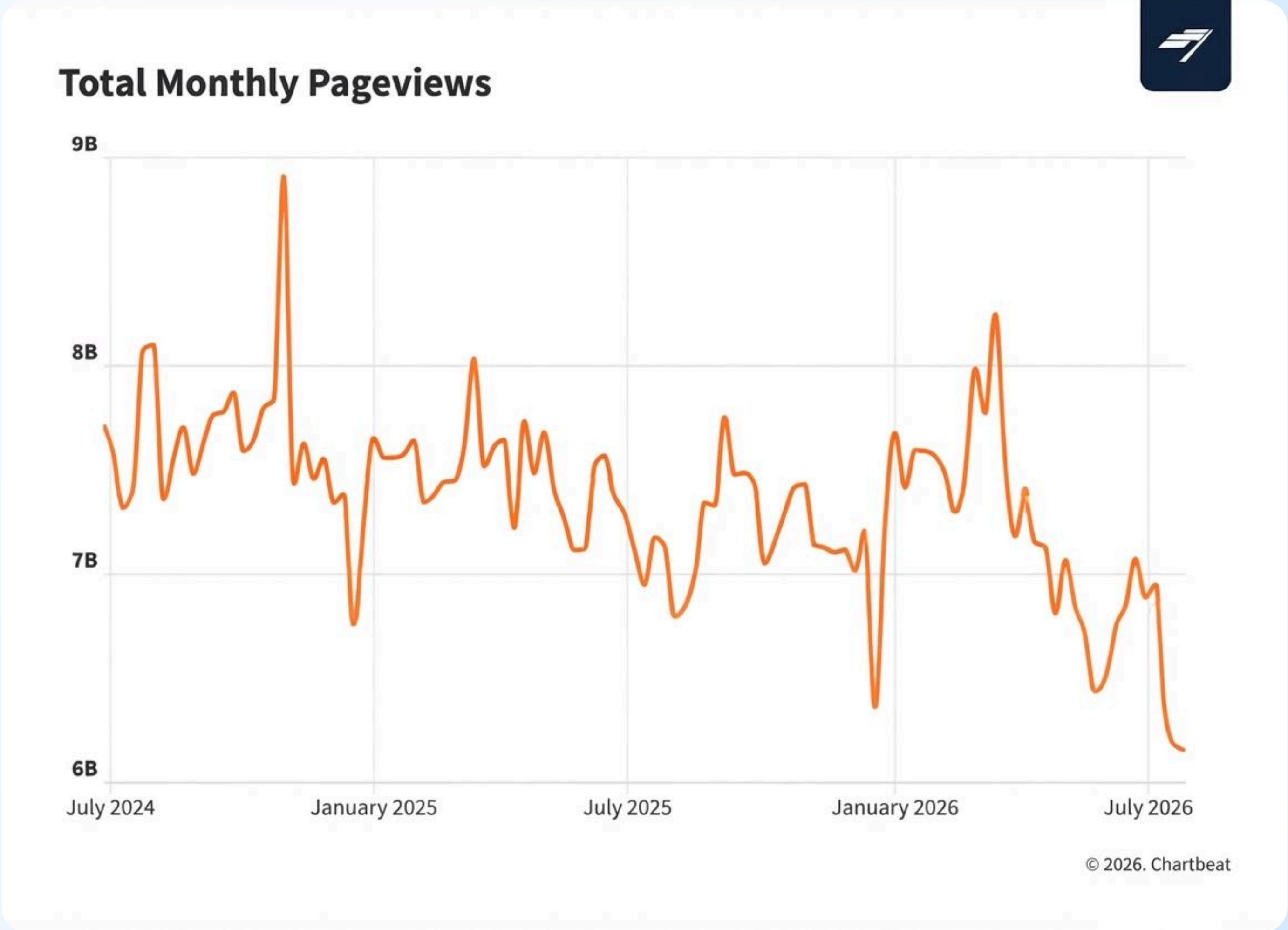
Data on how far readers actually scroll before they leave

The real reason loyal readers are the one segment holding steady

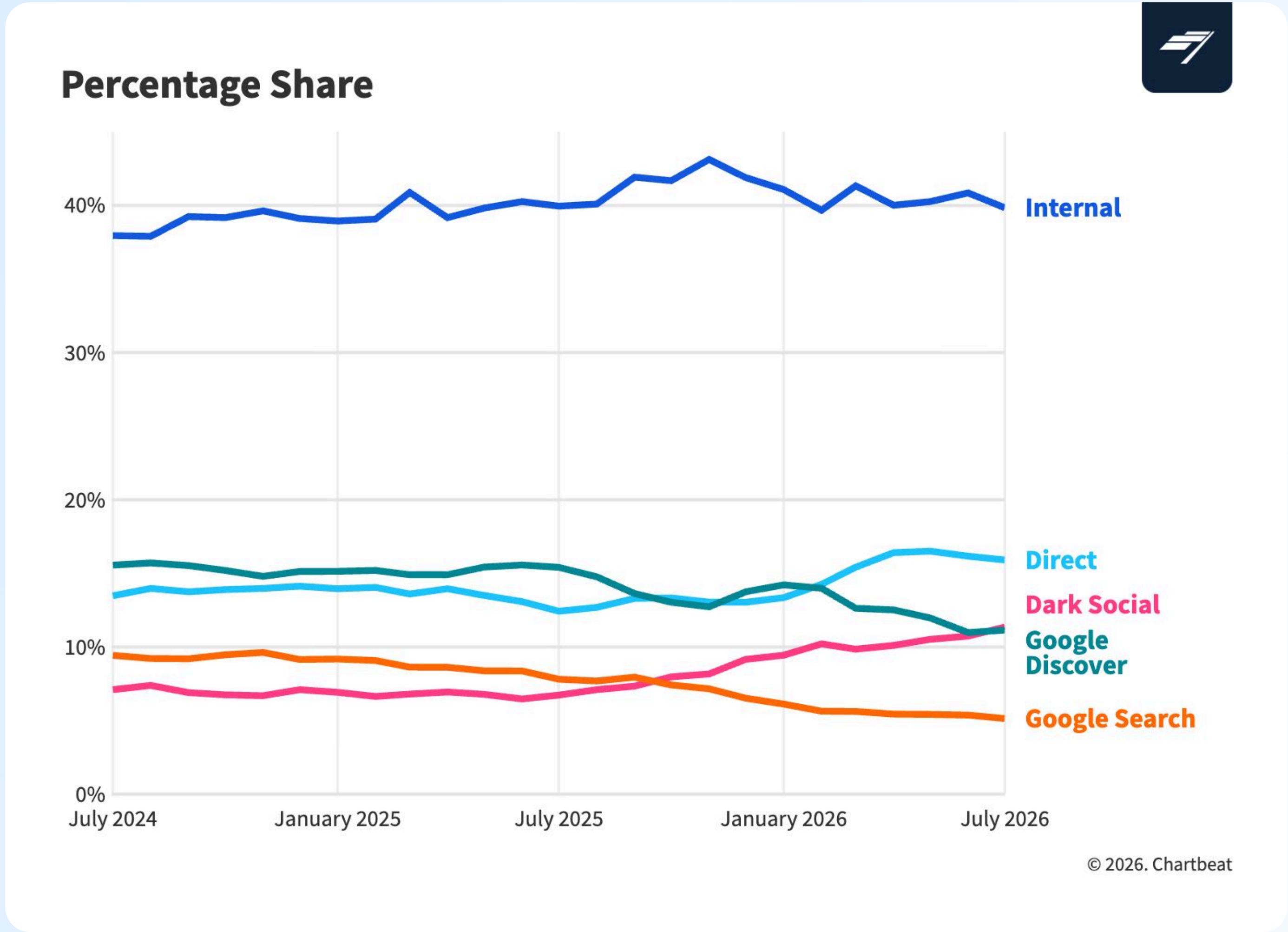
Tips for turning your homepage into a stronger recirculation engine

How audiences are finding your site in 2026

From January 2026 through July 2026, average monthly pageviews across the Chartbeat network numbered 31.1 billion. This is a slight decline from 2025's average of about 32 billion, but a negligible difference — especially when you consider the globally impactful events yet to come, such as US midterm elections in November.



Which channels are generating the most pageviews?



Internal traffic continues to generate the largest share of pageviews at 40.4%, with **direct traffic** following at 15.4%. Search, as we’ve reported previously, continues a downward trend. **Google Search** made up about 9% of pageviews in July 2024 and fell to 5% in July 2026, a relative drop of almost 46% in two years. **Google Discover** fell 28.4% over the same stretch.

Google Search & Google Discover YoY Decline		
	July '24 – July '25	July '25 – July '26
Google Search	-21.9%	-40.2%
Google Discover	-6.6%	-34.3%

Which channels are growing?

In contrast to search referrals declining between July 2024 and July 2026, **three channels that media companies have greater control over are growing.**

Growth in Channels Publishers Can Control
July 2024 to July 2026

Dark Social	7.1%	→	11.3%	+4.2%
Direct Traffic	13.5%	→	15.9%	+2.4%
Internal Traffic	37.9%	→	40.4%	+2.5%

Why these channels matter

Dark social, direct traffic, and internal traffic differ from search and social in that these three channels are much more similar to an owned audience. As we've seen with Facebook deprioritizing or even blocking news in places like Canada, reach on similar platforms is borrowed.

Dark social, direct, and internal traffic, on the other hand, are more indicative of readers forming trust and loyalty. They've decided that the content is worth sharing privately, the URL is worth bookmarking, and the breadth of content is worth clicking deeper into a site. The shift in this data isn't just that search has gone down and other channels have gone up. It's a shift in what kind of traffic is growing. Fortunately, the channels that are growing are the ones that media companies have more control over.

What about AI?

Two things can be true: **AI referrals** can grow 8x in two years, and still be almost negligible compared to other channels at just 0.01% of traffic. In addition to its minimal effect on overall traffic, the shape of the data shows AI referrals declining across ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Microsoft Copilot, and Gemini in 2026.

This doesn't mean it's a channel to ignore. Instead, you should be aware that AI's threat to publishers isn't uniform. **Generic, easily-summarized content is the most exposed** to being answered inside a chat interface without a click-through, while **original reporting and differentiated expertise are harder for any AI model to replace outright.**

Where to start on your own site



Search continues to decline, so supplement SEO efforts with other strategies.

Treat SEO as just one channel among several, while moving resources to developing audiences your organization can more closely influence.



Acknowledge dark social, and optimize for it.

Readers are sharing links through texts, DMs, and private channels at a meaningfully faster rate than any other channel. A lightweight tracking layer like UTM tags is the difference between guessing at this channel and actively managing it.



Not all content is equally at risk from AI. Know your exposure so you can fortify your reporting.

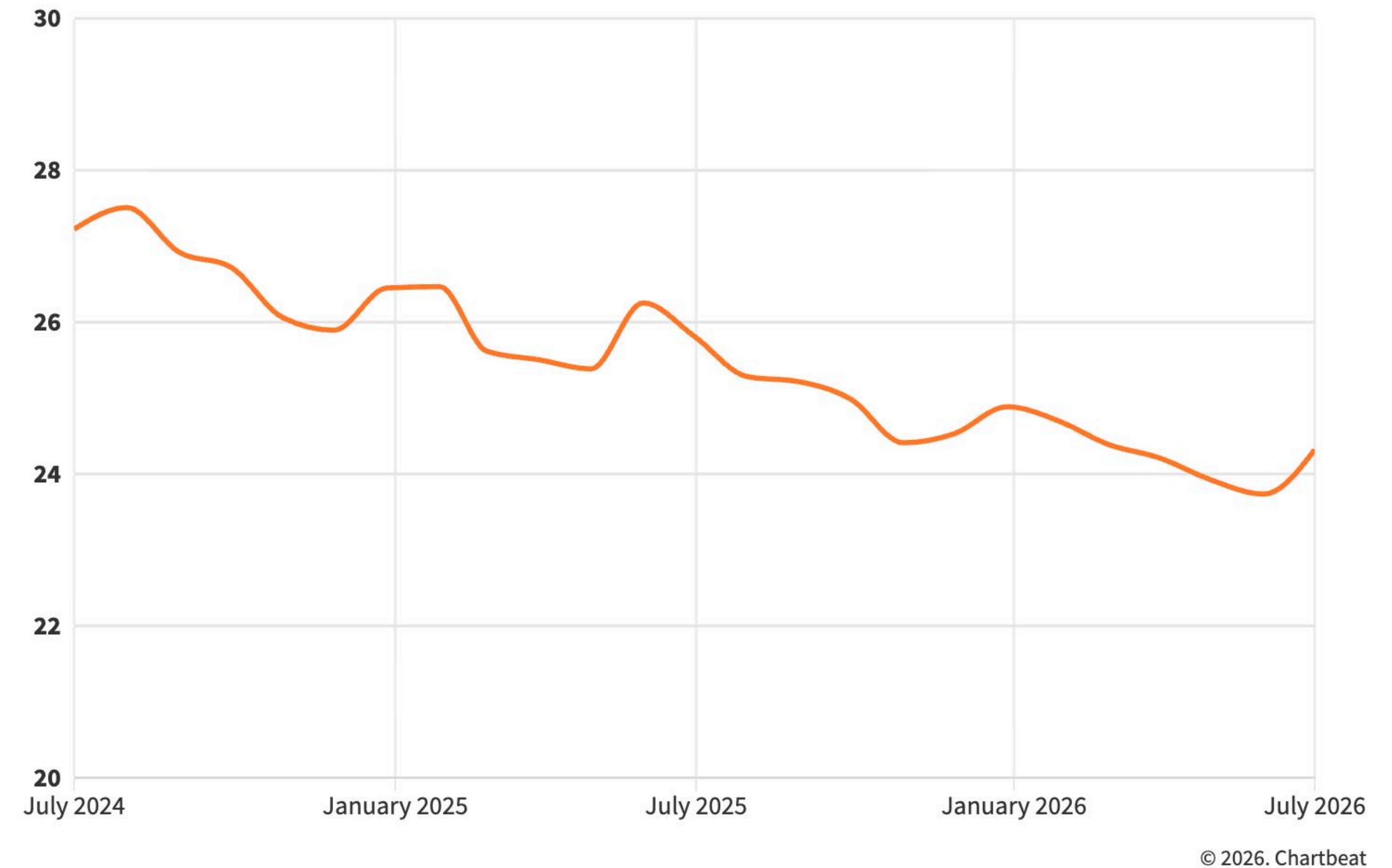
Audit your highest-traffic evergreen and reference content specifically for AI-answerability. If a chatbot can fully answer the question your article addresses without a click-through, that content is more exposed than your differentiated reporting is.

How readers are engaging on the page

Knowing where a reader comes from is only useful if that data tells you something about what happens next. If search, the channel with the historically highest engagement time, is shrinking fastest while dark social and direct are growing, the reader base itself may be shifting in ways that show up on the page as well. So the next question isn't, "Who's coming?" but rather, **"What do visitors do once they arrive?"**

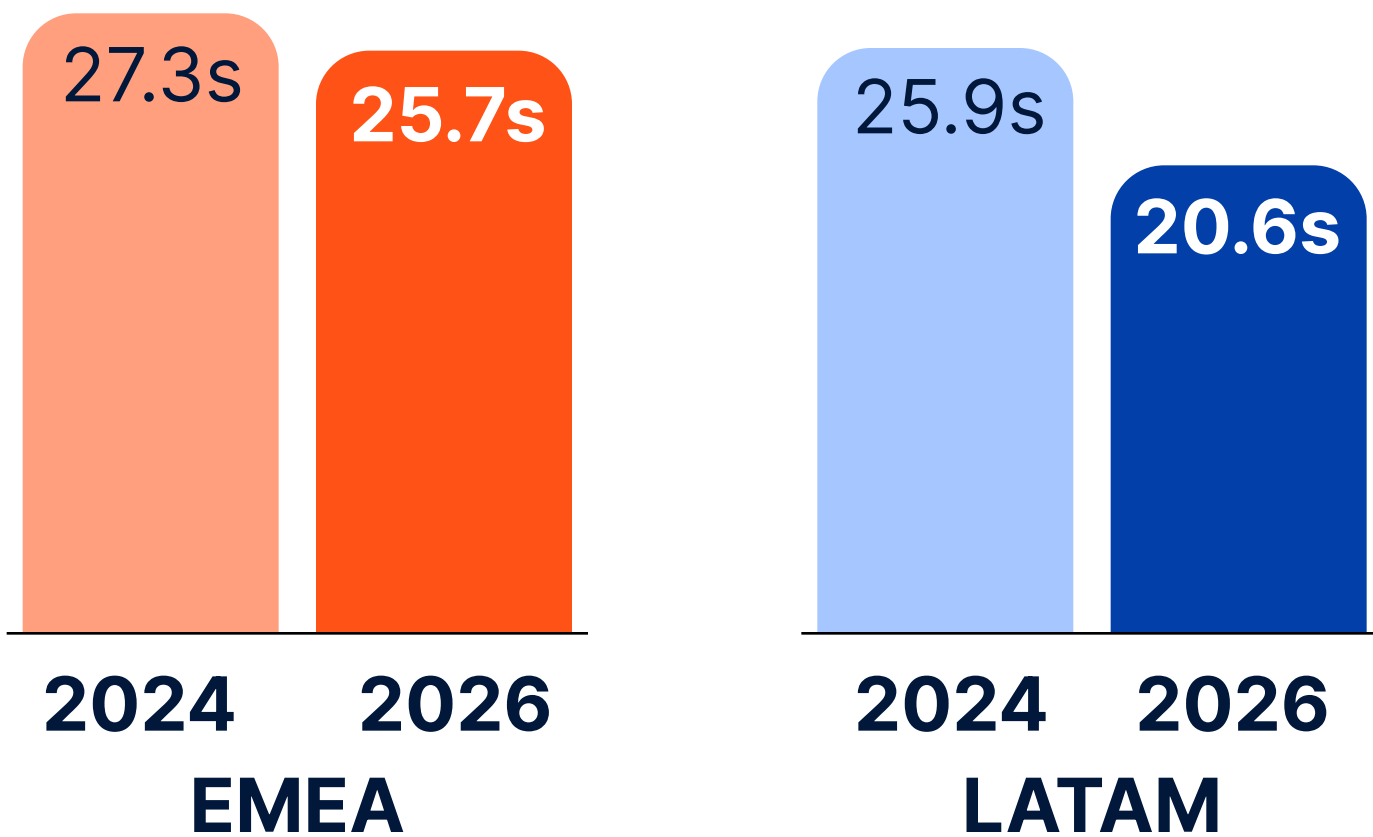
In the first half of 2026, **average engaged time across the network was 24.3 seconds**. This is down from 25.5 seconds in 2025, and also down from 26.7 seconds in 2024.

Average Engaged Time in Seconds



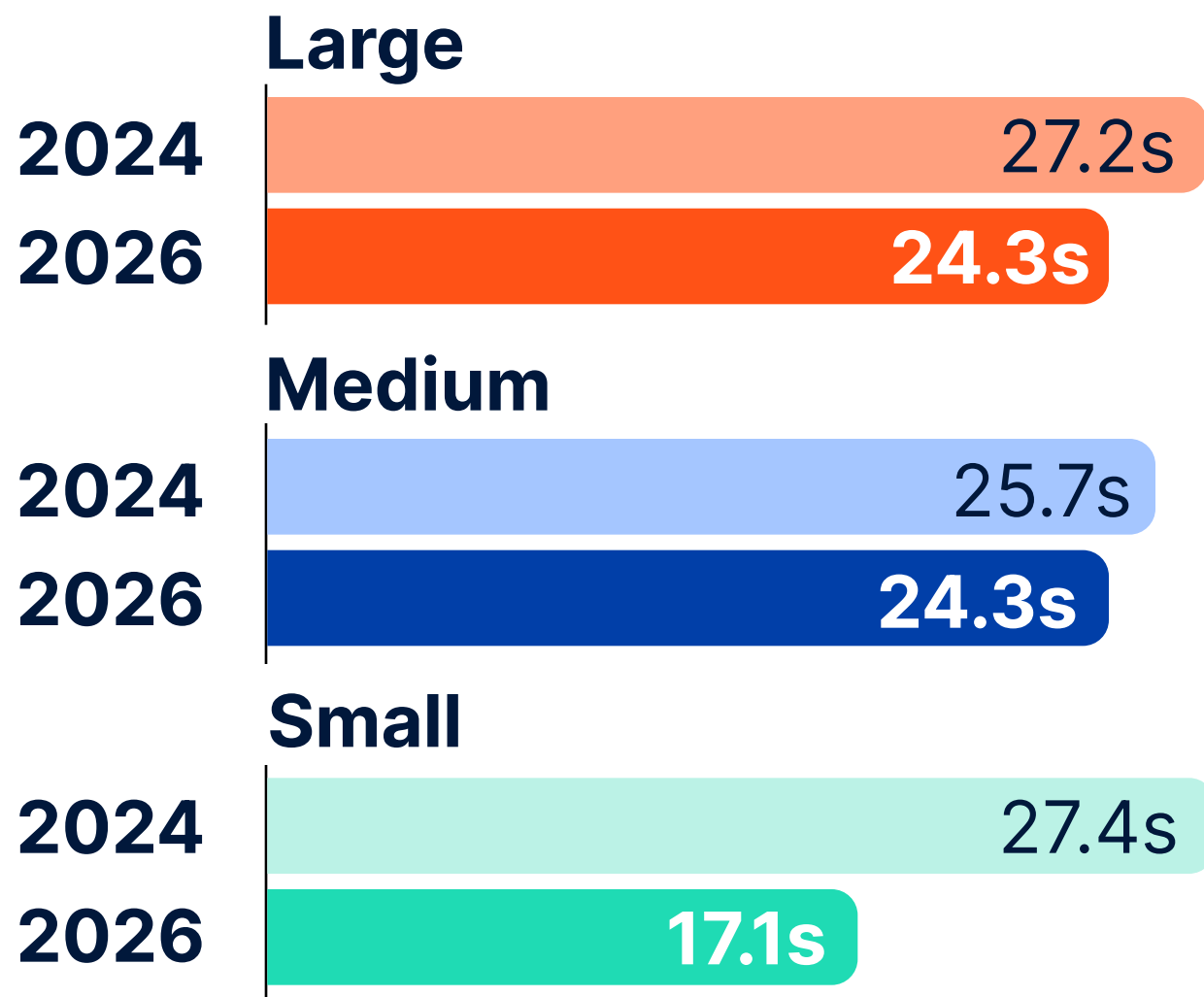
That decline in average engaged time shows up consistently across data cuts.

By Region



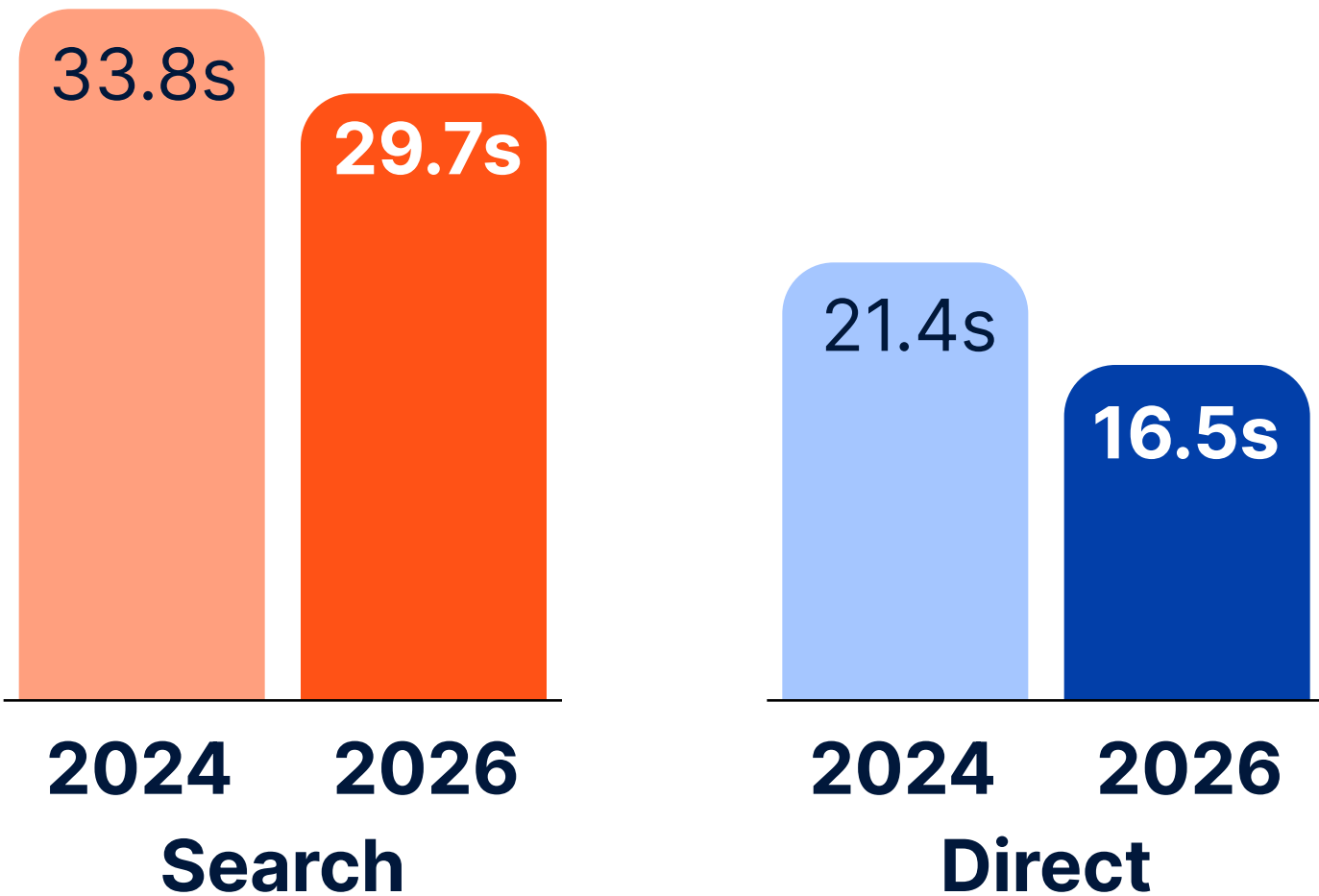
EMEA had the smallest decline from 27.3 to 25.7 seconds, while LATAM had the steepest decline from 25.9 to 20.6 seconds.

By Site Size*



Large and Medium sites held up best, while Small sites saw a much steeper drop from 27.4 to 17.1 seconds. This mirrors our previous finding that smaller publishers are also bearing the brunt of the traffic shift.

By Referral Source



Readers referred by search engines still engage the longest, even after declining from 33.8 seconds in 2024 to 29.7 seconds in 2026. Direct visitors, already the least engaged, dropped from 21.4 to 16.5 seconds.

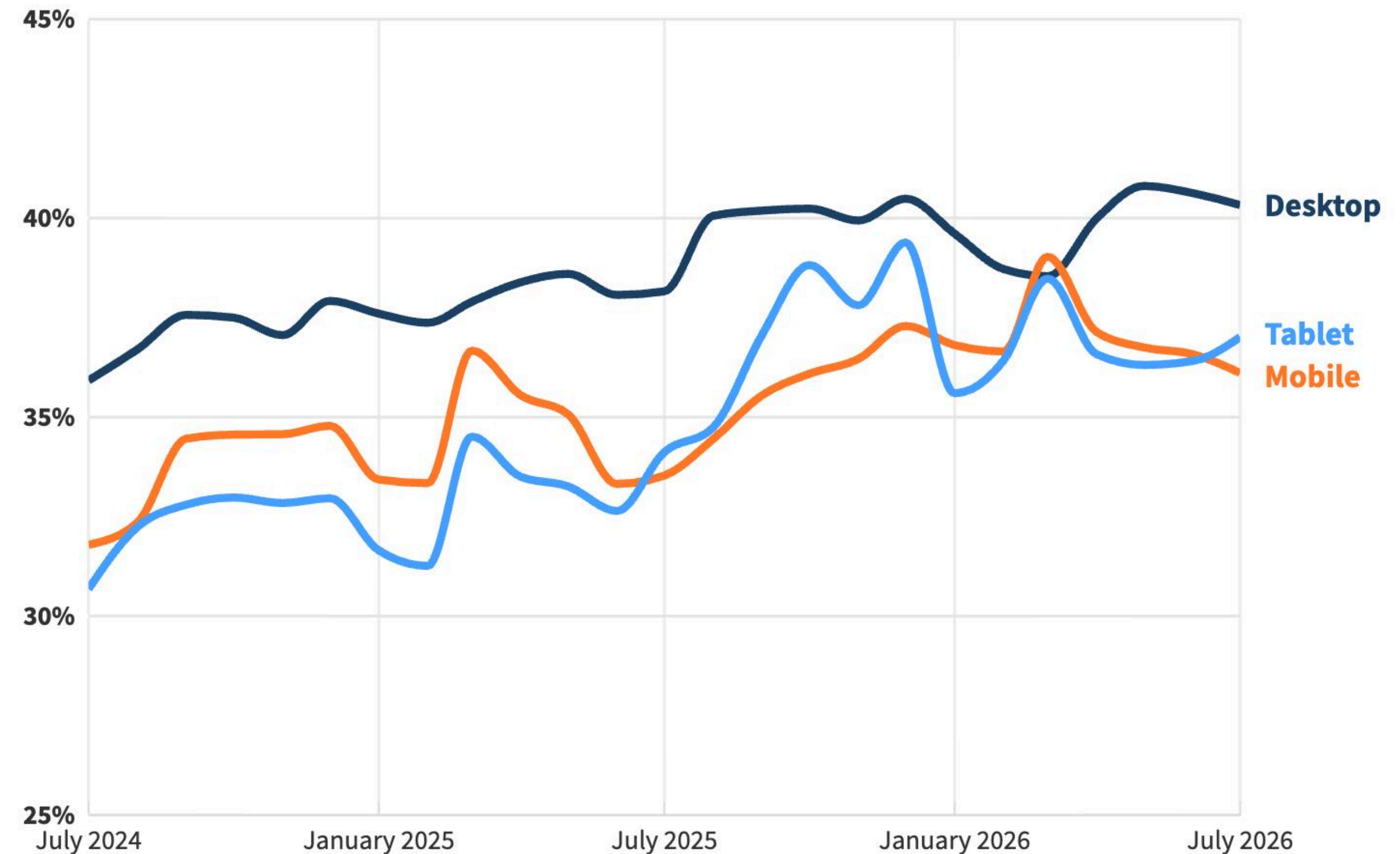
*Site size is based on daily average pageviews.
Large = 100K+, Medium = 10K-100K, and Small = 1K-10K.

Scroll behavior tells the same story from a different angle

Readers aren't just spending less time on your site, they're engaging with less of the page itself. Across devices, **about 40% of visitors don't scroll at all**; a figure that's risen over the past two years.

Among readers who do scroll, they're dropping off earlier. The pixel depth at which 50% of visitors leave a page shrank from 700px to 500px on desktop, from 1,100px to 800px on mobile, and from 1,200px to 800px on tablet. This matters most for the readers you're trying to keep, because **a page that loses nearly half its audience above the fold is struggling to inspire the behavior loyalty is built on: convincing a new or returning reader to engage with additional content.**

Percentage of Visits with No Scrolling



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Where to start on your own site



Your most important calls-to-action (related-content modules, newsletter signup, second-story prompts) need to move higher up the page.

If half your readers are gone by the time they reach 500 to 800 pixels of scroll depth, anything placed below that depth is only being seen by a shrinking minority of visitors.



Audit the scroll depth on your highest-traffic page types.

The device and referrer breakdowns above suggest the drop-off is uneven; identify which of your own templates are losing readers earliest, and fix those first.



If you're a small or mid-sized site, benchmark your engaged time against the network numbers.

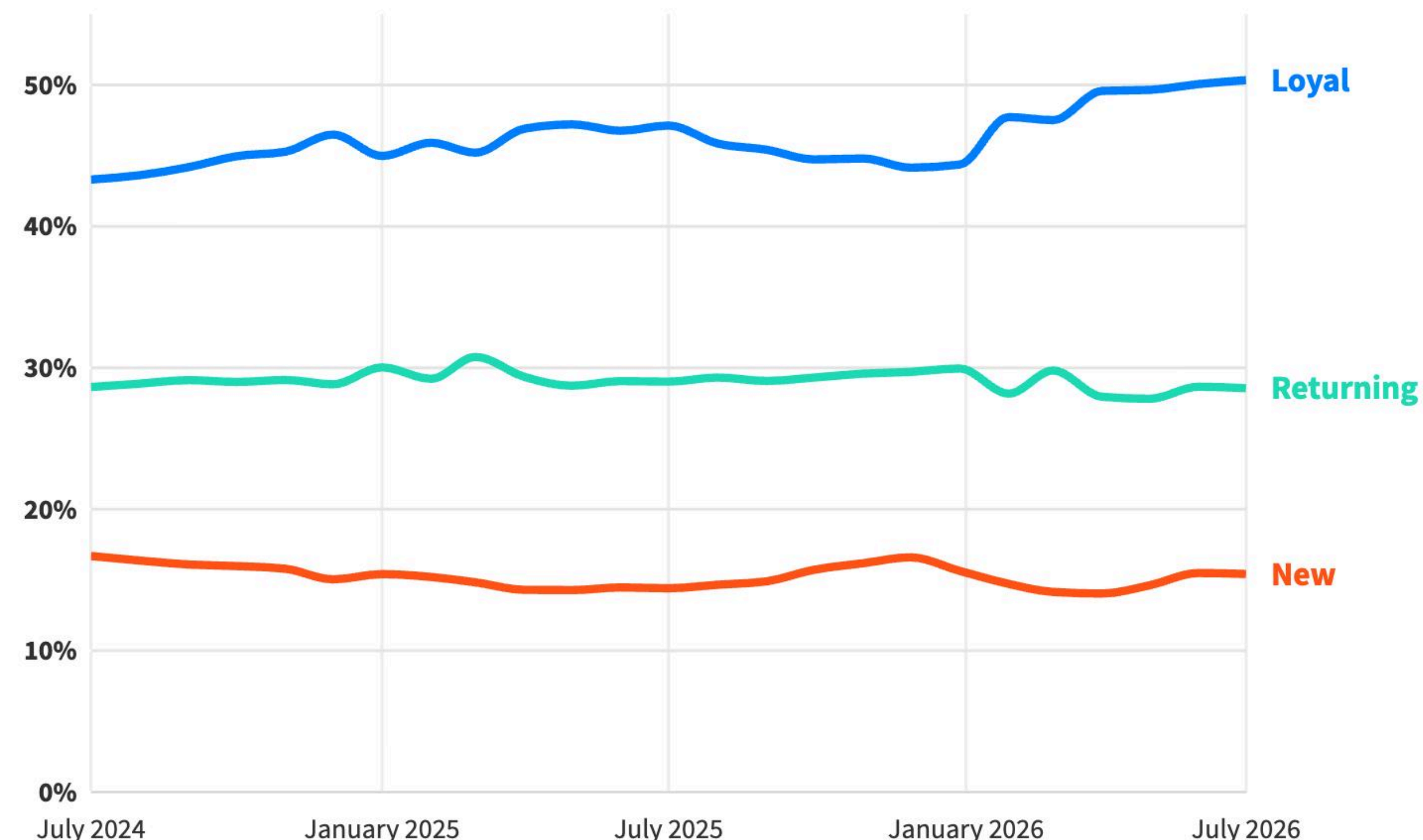
If you're declining faster than the Large/Medium range, that's a signal to prioritize on-site experience work like load speed, related content, and recirculation over acquisition efforts.

What loyalty looks like in 2026

If fewer readers are sticking around on any given visit, and even fewer are engaging meaningfully, the ones who do return only increase in value. The good news here is that **loyal readers aren't just a growing share of traffic. They're also the segment that isn't losing any ground.**

Average monthly pageviews from loyal readers were slightly up from 2024 to 2026, growing from 14.98 billion to **15.02 billion**, while returning readers fell 8% and new readers fell 14% over the same period. As acquisition gets more challenging and the number of returning and new readers shrink, loyal readers are a major reason why overall pageviews haven't seen a major decline.

Share of Pageviews by Loyalty



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That resilience shows up at the individual level, too.

The average loyal reader generated about 93 pageviews per month in July 2026, an 11% increase over the last two years, while a returning reader generated about 6 pageviews and a new reader generated about 1.5 pageviews, both essentially flat over the same period.

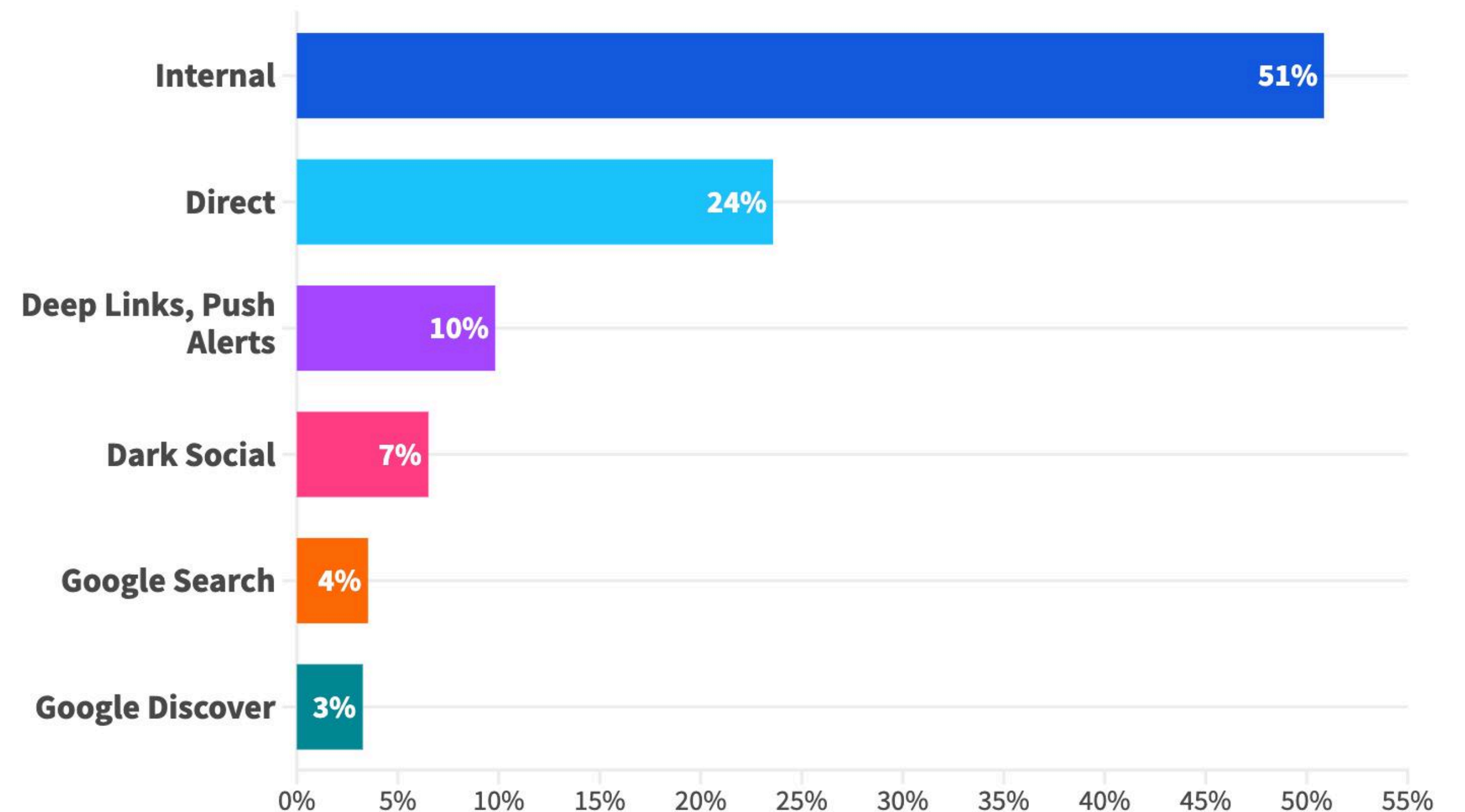
In other words, **a loyal reader now accounts for 62 times as many monthly pageviews as a new reader**, and about **15 times as many as a returning reader**.



Where are loyal readers coming from?

During the most recent month in our study, **internal traffic** accounted for about 51% of loyal reader pageviews, **direct traffic** accounted for 24%, and **deep links and push alerts** added about 10%. Loyal readers are **not** finding content via discovery channels. They're coming back directly or via the publisher's own channels.

Percentage of Loyal Pageviews by Referrer



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Where loyal readers land is also markedly different from the average site visitor.

Loyal Reader Entry Points



The split between articles and landing pages (such as the homepage) has held close to steady over the last two years at about 54% articles and 46% landing pages.

Across all traffic, however, only about 33% of site visits start on a landing page, showing us that loyal readers rely on the publisher's own navigation more than the average reader does. They use landing pages as a jumping-off point into the rest of the site.

This is consistent with previous recirculation research showing that **the homepage generates nearly twice as many pageviews for other pages on a site than it gets itself.**

This is a sign of its strength as an internal referrer, and a good indication that loyal readers will continue to engage with your content.

Where to start on your own site



Treat your homepage and landing pages as navigational infrastructure, not pages meant to hold attention on their own.

Since loyal readers enter through them well above the network average, invest in clear next-story prompts and recirculation modules directly on the homepage.



Audit what's actually driving your push notifications and deep links, since these are outperforming search and social for bringing loyal readers back. If your push strategy is inconsistent or your app's deep-linking is broken for certain content types, that's a fixable gap sitting on top of your best-performing retention channel.



Benchmark your own homepage and landing page recirculation rate against the network's 50%.

Given how disproportionately loyal readers rely on these pages as an entry point, the modules and design choices there are doing more retention work than most publishers give them credit for.

Putting the lifecycle together

None of these numbers mean acquisition and engagement matter less. **Every loyal reader today was once a new visitor.** With the volume of new visitors shrinking, the top of the funnel is narrowing at the exact moment the bottom of the funnel is proving to be the most valuable place in the reader lifecycle. Engagement is the hinge between the two. A reader doesn't become loyal based on how they discover you. They become loyal by having a good experience with your differentiated content, building trust, and forming a habit. And it's that habit that helped media companies survive the transition from radio to TV, and TV to the internet. The publishers who flourished weren't the ones who found the next channel first, they were the ones who'd already built an audience.

Learn more about how [Chartbeat, Inc.](#) is shaping the future of media strategy and revenue

Key Findings



Search continues to decline.

Google Search and Google Discover fell a combined 12.4% from July 2024 to July 2025. From July 2025 to July 2026, that decline increased to 36.3%.



Small publishers are experiencing rapid decreases in average engaged time.

The same size-based gap that shows up in acquisition shows up in engagement, too. Small sites are losing engaged time at roughly double the rate of Large and Medium sites.



AI referral volume is still miniscule.

Out of all AI providers, ChatGPT is the most effective driver of traffic, even though total AI referral share remains under 0.01% of pageviews.



Loyal readers are holding their ground, and their value is growing.

Loyal pageviews grew modestly from 2024 to 2026 (+0.2%) while returning readers fell 8% and new readers fell 14%. A loyal reader now generates roughly 62 times as many monthly pageviews as a new reader, and that gap is widening over time, a major reason for the stability in global pageviews.

Know where your audience comes from — and where they'll go next.

[Request a Demo](#)



Chartbeat, the leading content intelligence platform for media, delivers simple, reliable analytics and optimization tools that show your editorial team how people are engaging with content across your site and empower you to keep them engaged even longer.

Tracking more than 50 billion monthly pageviews across more than 70 countries, our real-time and historical dashboards, in-page optimization tools, and robust reporting help the world's leading media organizations understand, measure, and build value from their content.

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