Retail media - A shiny new toy or an old dog with new tricks?

A man walks into a supermarket, gets a trolley and is immediately reminded of the need for fish fingers and a specific brand at that…….
Retail media has been around for ages – and indeed many of its oldest forms still exist. From trolley-ads, page ads in the "club-card" magazines, a static aisle end message, or a car park 6-sheet, retail media has always been present – it has just become bigger, more measurable and possibly…. less transparent!

Now in the 21st Century, by allowing brands to promote products and services across partner-owned channels, including websites, marketplaces, apps and digital environments, Retail media advertising has the ability to reach consumers using strong first-party data, with intent and proximity to purchase.

Combining data, media and commerce, retail media enables retailers to compete with (and increasingly outperform) traditional media channels such as publishers and broadcasters, offering more precise targeting, clearer attribution and direct links to sales outcomes.

With advantages for both retailers and brands, it is the fastest growing digital channel, with predicted forecasts expecting the sector globally to grow to $200bn by the end of 2026 with a 50% growth to $300bn by 2030. Companies that master this opportunity will gain a significant competitive edge.
So, what is the downside?

As suggested above, companies that master this opportunity will gain a significant competitive edge, but companies who don't, or indeed think they have - but haven't, could lose out, or at worst get burnt.

This is not just an emerging platform, but one that continues to grow and open up new advertising opportunities for brands. However, as with any new investment opportunity, there comes the many learnings and challenges which are needed to be overcome ensuring it remains a highly valuable advertising channel for all stakeholders.
However, with no industry wide standards available to consistently measure the success or otherwise of activity it is difficult for stakeholders to understand how key outcomes have been met. This is where 3AC can aid the process.

As well as large retailer owned networks there are numerous retail media partners working across many clients, so how does the host know it is getting its agreed return? Similarly, from an advertiser perspective with a

host of "agents" in the chain, how do they know they are getting, or indeed paying too much for what they get?
The devil is in the detail, and the detail needs to be in the contract. First and foremost, it is important from an advertiser perspective that audit rights extend to any retail media spend and to any third party along the chain. Similarly, retailers using a third-party network should also ensure there are robust transparency and audit clauses.

How can 3AC help manage this?

A Retail media Contract Compliance Audit would examine the full commercial and operational lifecycle of retail media activity — from contracting and remuneration through to campaign delivery and reporting.

Confirming all parties involved in the chain adhere to agreed terms, verifying financial flows, and ensuring brands receive agreed value for spend. Key metrics, as payment terms as well as non-transparent buys are closely audited. Beyond validation, it provides insight into how retail media activity can be better governed and integrated into wider marketing operations. For stakeholders at both ends of the chain – advertiser and retailer!
Audit objectives typically include:

- Verifying financial accuracy and identifying any recoverable funds
- Reviewing fee transparency and third-party margins
- Assessing proof of delivery and performance validation
- Evaluating contract robustness and governance standards
- Ensuring data integrity, disclosure, and audience authenticity
- Learnings and insights for the advertiser to improve further

Key Areas of Focus

I. Contract Review

- Confirmation of audit rights, transparency obligations and data access provisions.
- Authorisation and approval of non-transparent activity
- Verification of IP and data ownership, exclusivity, and content liability clauses
- Validation of deliverables, timelines, and usage rights
- Payment terms and remuneration agreements

- Termination clauses, exit options, liabilities etc.
- In compliance with relevant regional laws and regulations
- In line with corporate compliance policies

II. Financial Review

- Examination of billing accuracy and related-party transactions
- Audit of production costs based on actual costs
- Identification of any third, or fourth-party markups, rebates, or hidden fees where audit rights permit
- Verification of payment terms, outstanding balances, and unspent campaign funds
- Transparency of performance-based remuneration and reporting

III. Operational Review

- Adherence to selection and approval processes (of retailer)
- Adherence to corporate guidelines if in place
- Campaign monitoring procedures: Governance over campaign delivery,

IV. Tailored Best Practice Workshops

- Retail media Management status and risk assessment
- Objectives and future strategy. Central vs. local roles and responsibilities
- Supplier set-up, Contractual framework requirements
- Communication, training and learning
- Standardised procedures, documents, KPIs and tools
- AI in Retail media marketing
- Regional Regulatory Requirements & Platform Compliance

The Benefits:

A structured retail media audit drives tangible commercial and governance benefits:

Financial integrity: Validate spend and recover unallocated or misapplied funds.

Improved governance: Strengthen processes and ensure transparency across the spend.
Enhanced relationships: Build trust between brand, agency, and any third party through accountability.
Risk mitigation: Identify compliance gaps, reputational risks, and disclosure issues.
Future-proof contracts: Align remuneration, KPIs, and rights with modern marketing practices.
Training and learning: cross-functional and international training for client teams

Conclusion: Turning Retail Media into an Accountable and transparent Investment

How 3ACompliance Delivers Value

Audit: End-to-end Contract Compliance Audits across retail media activity, identifying areas of financial leakage and contractual non-compliance.
Analysis: Turning complex audit data into actionable insights that support strategic and operational decision-making reviewing operational setup.
Assessment: Operational reviews, qualitative assessment and workshops to guide retail media engagement and results. Providing clear recommendations, remediation actions, and future control enhancements to reinforce transparency and maximise commercial return.
3ACompliance turns contract compliance into competitive advantage — delivering actionable audits, proven ROI, and clarity that strengthens agency partnerships and business performance