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USER ACQUISITION GUIDE



# The App Marketing Guide

Get installs that turn into paying, retained users

Igor Shenshin / Head of User Acquisition

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I have spent more than twelve years buying traffic for apps, and the thing I wish someone had told me early is that installs are cheap and users are expensive. Anyone can buy a download. Getting a person who opens the app, finds value, pays, and comes back is a different sport entirely. This guide is about that second thing, because that is the only number that pays your salary.

I wrote this the way I would explain it to a new hire on my team. Plain language, real mechanics, and the tradeoffs I actually weigh when I decide where the next dollar goes. You will not find growth hacks here. You will find a way of thinking about the app funnel, the store, the paid channels, and the money math that ties them together so your spend compounds instead of leaking.

# Why mobile UA is its own game

If you come from web marketing, mobile will feel familiar for about a week, then it will surprise you. On the web you own the funnel end to end. You run an ad, you land the click on your page, you drop your own pixel, and you watch the whole path in one system. On mobile, two gatekeepers sit in the middle of everything you do: Apple and Google. They own the store, the payment rail, the ranking algorithm, and increasingly the data you are allowed to see.

That changes the job in concrete ways. Your conversion event happens inside a store you do not control. A big chunk of demand comes from people searching the store directly, which is organic real estate you influence but cannot buy outright. And since Apple tightened privacy, a large share of your paid results comes back aggregated and delayed rather than as clean user-level data. You are steering with less precise instruments, so you learn to steer differently.

- The store is the conversion page, and you only get partial control over it.
- Organic search inside the store is a real, large acquisition channel, not an afterthought.
- Attribution is probabilistic and delayed on iOS, so you plan around cohorts, not individual clicks.
- The payment happens through Apple or Google, which takes a cut and shapes your pricing and margins.
- Retention and reinstall behavior matter more because acquisition is harder to measure cleanly.

## PRO TIP

Before you spend a dollar on ads, make sure your store listing converts. Paid traffic amplifies whatever your store page already does, good or bad. A weak listing turns an ad budget into a fast way to lose money.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mobile UA runs through Apple and Google, so you never fully own the funnel.
- Store search is a major channel, which is why ASO and paid work as a pair.
- Expect aggregated, delayed measurement on iOS and design your process for it.

# The app funnel, stage by stage

Every app has the same underlying funnel, and if you cannot say your numbers for each stage out loud, you are not ready to scale spend. The stages are impression, install, activation, purchase, and retention. Money leaks between every one of them, and the leaks compound. A ten percent improvement early in the funnel is worth far more than a clever bid tweak at the end.

- 1 Impression to tap: someone sees your ad or store listing and decides to look closer. Creative and store thumbnail do the work here.
- 2 Tap to install: they land on the store page and download. This is your store conversion rate, the heart of ASO.
- 3 Install to activation: they open the app and reach the first real value moment, whatever that is for you.
- 4 Activation to purchase: they hit a paywall, a subscription, or an in-app purchase and convert.
- 5 Purchase to retention: they keep coming back and, ideally, keep paying past the first cycle.

## Funnel stages and the metrics I watch at each one

Stage	Core metric	Healthy signal
Impression to tap	Tap-through rate	Creative earns attention above channel average
Tap to install	Store conversion rate	25 to 40 percent for search, higher for branded
Install to activation	Activation rate	Most new users reach the value moment in session one
Activation to purchase	Trial or purchase rate	Paywall converts a predictable, stable share
Purchase to retention	Day 30 retention and renewal	Cohorts flatten instead of sliding to zero

Find your worst stage and fix it before you touch anything else. I have watched teams pour budget into cheaper installs while forty percent of new users never finished onboarding. Cheaper installs into a broken funnel just means you lose money faster and with more confidence.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Know your rate at every stage from impression to retention.
- Early-funnel gains compound, so fix store conversion and activation first.
- A leaky funnel makes cheaper installs a trap, not a win.

# ASO: winning the store before you pay for it

App Store Optimization is the practice of getting more installs from the store itself, both by ranking for the right searches and by converting the people who land on your page. It splits into two halves that people constantly confuse. Keyword work helps you get found. The visual listing, screenshots, icon, and ratings, helps you get chosen. You need both, and they are optimized differently.

- Title and subtitle: your most valuable keyword space on iOS. Lead with your strongest relevant term, not just your brand.
- Keyword field and description: iOS uses a hidden keyword field; Google reads your full description, so write it for humans and the algorithm.
- Icon: the single most tested visual asset. It shows up in search results before anyone reads a word.
- Screenshots: your real sales pitch. The first two or three carry the decision, so lead with benefits, not feature tours.
- Ratings and reviews: social proof and a ranking factor. Prompt for reviews after a positive moment, never mid-task.

Both stores let you run listing experiments. Apple calls it Product Page Optimization, Google calls it Store Listing Experiments. Use them. A screenshot test that lifts store conversion from thirty to thirty-six percent is a twenty percent efficiency gain across every channel that sends traffic to that page, paid and organic alike. That is the highest-leverage testing you can do in this whole game.

## PRO TIP

Test one thing at a time and give it enough installs to reach significance. I like to run store experiments for at least one to two weeks so you capture both weekday and weekend behavior before you call a winner.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Keywords get you found; screenshots, icon, and ratings get you chosen.
- Use Apple and Google listing experiments as your default habit, not a one-off.
- A store conversion lift improves paid and organic at the same time.

# The paid channels and how to pick

There are four channels I lean on for almost every app, and each does a different job. Apple Search Ads captures high-intent people already searching the App Store. Google App Campaigns run across Search, Play, YouTube, and the display network with heavy automation. Meta is your broad-reach discovery and lookalike engine. TikTok is where creative-led discovery wins and cheaper installs often hide. You rarely start with all four. You start where your users and your creative strengths line up.

## How I think about the four main paid channels

Channel	Best for	Watch out for
Apple Search Ads	High-intent iOS search, branded defense	Limited scale, iOS only, competition on your own brand terms
Google App Campaigns	Scale and automation across Google surfaces	Little manual control, needs strong signal to optimize well
Meta	Broad reach, lookalikes, retargeting depth	Creative fatigue is fast, iOS signal is aggregated
TikTok	Creative-led discovery, lower install costs	Quality varies, needs a constant creative pipeline

A practical starting order for a new app: lock down Apple Search Ads on your brand and top category terms first, because that intent is the cheapest quality you will ever buy. Then open one broad channel, usually Meta or TikTok, depending on where your creative sings. Add Google App Campaigns once you have enough downstream conversion signal to feed its automation, because it optimizes poorly when you starve it of events.

- Give each channel a clear job instead of asking all of them to do everything.
- Feed the automated channels, Google and Meta, real in-app conversion events, not just installs.
- Do not judge a channel on install cost alone; judge it on cost per activated or paying user.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Four channels, four jobs: Apple Search Ads intent, Google scale, Meta reach, TikTok creative discovery.
- Start with high-intent capture, then add one broad channel you can feed with good creative.
- Compare channels on quality-adjusted cost, never on raw cost per install.

# Attribution and the privacy reality, in plain English

You need to know which spend created which valuable users. On mobile you do this through a Mobile Measurement Partner, an MMP, such as AppsFlyer, Adjust, or Singular. The MMP sits between your ad networks and your app, receives the signals, and decides which channel gets credit for each install and the events that follow. It is the neutral referee so that Meta and Google are not both claiming the same user.

Then Apple changed the rules. With App Tracking Transparency, most users decline to be tracked across apps, so the old user-level attribution on iOS largely went away. In its place is SKAdNetwork, Apple's privacy-preserving framework. Here is the plain-English version: instead of telling you exactly which user did what, SKAdNetwork sends back a delayed, aggregated postback with a limited conversion value. You learn that a campaign produced some valuable outcomes, but not who, not immediately, and not in fine detail.

- Attribution on iOS is aggregated and delayed, so real-time optimization gives way to cohort thinking.
- You get a small conversion value to encode what matters most; spend that budget on your highest-value early signal.
- Android still allows richer measurement today, so your iOS and Android playbooks will differ.
- Do not chase per-click precision that no longer exists; plan and judge in weekly cohorts.

## PRO TIP

Design your SKAdNetwork conversion value schema around the earliest event that predicts real value, such as completing onboarding or starting a trial. If you map it to a purchase that happens on day seven, the signal often arrives too late to be useful.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An MMP is your referee for who gets credit across networks.
- On iOS, expect aggregated and delayed data through SKAdNetwork, not user-level detail.
- Encode your most predictive early event into the conversion value and think in cohorts.

# Creative that actually drives installs

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In a privacy-first world where targeting is blunter, creative does more of the work than it used to. The algorithm finds the right people, but only if your creative gives it a strong signal by earning attention and taps from the right kind of viewer. On the broad channels, creative is your real targeting lever now. So I treat creative production as a pipeline, not a project.

- 1 Start from the user's problem, not your feature list. Show the pain and the payoff in the first two seconds.
- 2 Make several distinct concepts, not one concept with color swaps. You are testing ideas, not shades.
- 3 Match the format to the channel: vertical, sound-on, native-feeling video for TikTok and Reels.
- 4 Ship a steady cadence because creative fatigues fast, especially on Meta and TikTok.
- 5 Kill losers quickly and pour budget into the few winners, then spin variations off those winners.

One habit pays off constantly: keep your ad creative and your first screenshots telling the same story. When the promise in the ad matches what people see on the store page, conversion holds up and the whole funnel feels honest. When they clash, you pay for the tap and lose the install.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Creative is the main targeting lever when data is limited, so invest in it.
- Run a constant pipeline of distinct concepts and retire fatigued ads fast.
- Keep ad and store messaging consistent so the funnel does not leak at the handoff.

# LTV, payback, and setting budgets

This is where UA stops being a creative exercise and becomes a finance one. Everything comes down to two numbers: how much a user is worth over time, your lifetime value, and how much it costs to acquire one, your cost to acquire. If LTV comfortably exceeds acquisition cost within a payback window you can afford, you scale. If not, you fix the funnel or the pricing before you spend more.

A simple payback view for a subscription app

Input	Example value	What it tells you
Cost to acquire a paying user	40 dollars	Your all-in blended acquisition cost
Monthly revenue per paying user	8 dollars net	After store fees and refunds
Months to payback	About 5 months	How long until that user repays acquisition
Retained months beyond payback	Everything after	This is your profit and your room to reinvest

Notice I use net revenue after the store takes its cut. Forgetting the store fee is the most common way teams talk themselves into unprofitable spend. I set a target payback window based on cash flow, often somewhere in the range of two to six months for many consumer apps, then I let campaigns that beat it scale and I choke the ones that do not. Because iOS value data is delayed, I forecast early LTV from day 1 to 7 signals and refine as later cohorts mature.

## PRO TIP

Budget forward from payback, not backward from a spend target. Decide the payback window you can fund, find the acquisition cost that satisfies it, then spend as much as the channels will give you at that cost. That is how you scale without going broke.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Compare LTV to acquisition cost using net revenue after store fees.
- Set a payback window you can actually finance, then scale what beats it.
- Forecast from early cohort signals since full iOS value data arrives late.

# Making ASO and paid UA work together

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The biggest mistake I see is running ASO and paid UA as two separate teams with two separate scoreboards. They share the same store page, the same reviews, and the same conversion rate, so they either lift each other or drag each other down. Treated as one system, they compound.

- Paid traffic sends volume to your store page, which speeds up and sharpens your listing experiments.
- A better store conversion rate from ASO lowers your effective cost across every paid channel at once.
- Paid campaigns can lift keyword rankings by driving installs, which then feeds cheaper organic.
- Reviews and ratings improve when you route happy, activated users to a review prompt, which helps paid conversion too.

The workflow I run is a loop. ASO builds a store page that converts and ranks. Paid UA drives qualified traffic to that page and generates the volume that makes both listing tests and keyword movement faster. The downstream data from paid, activation and payback, tells ASO which audiences and messages are worth optimizing for. Round and round, each turn a little more efficient than the last.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ASO and paid share a store page, so optimize them as one system.
- A store conversion win is a discount on every paid channel simultaneously.
- Run the loop: ASO converts, paid drives volume, downstream data guides the next round.

## Where to go next

If you take one thing from this guide, let it be that you are buying retained, paying users, not installs, and the store is where most of that battle is won or lost. Start by measuring your funnel honestly, fix your worst stage, and only then scale spend against a payback window you can fund. For deeper walkthroughs on ASO, creative testing, and channel setup, read the blog at [shenshin.co](https://shenshin.co), and if you want the structured version with templates and examples, grab the free course. Come build a UA machine that compounds.

[shenshin.co](https://shenshin.co)