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■ THE PLAYBOOK · 03 · TIKTOK

How to Run a TikTok *Audit*

What to Check Before Blaming the Algorithm

A TikTok audit built around content signals, audience behavior, discovery and repeatable creative patterns, so the conversation starts with evidence instead of "the algorithm hates us."

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There is a very specific stage of TikTok underperformance where somebody inevitably says: **"The algorithm stopped pushing us."** Maybe. But before we put the algorithm on trial, I want evidence.

TikTok says For You recommendations are shaped by user interactions (what you like, share, comment on and create), video information such as captions, sounds and hashtags, and device and account settings such as language and country, which carry less weight. A strong signal like finishing a longer video from beginning to end gets more weight than a weak one. TikTok has also said that neither follower count nor previous high-performing videos are direct factors in the recommendation system [1].

That does not make TikTok simple. It does mean a useful audit starts with **what the content is teaching the system and the audience**, not with superstition. In 2026 it also means knowing who sets the rules for your US audience and how AI content gets labeled.

AC'S AUDIT RULE

Before blaming distribution, audit **the idea, the opening, the watch behavior, the packaging and the audience response**.

BEFORE YOU START RECENT SHIFTS TO ACCOUNT FOR

- On January 23, 2026, TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC was established to retrain and update the US recommendation algorithm on US user data in Oracle's US cloud and to hold decision-making authority over US content moderation and trust and safety policy [10].
- Under that structure, TikTok's global US entities still handle e-commerce, advertising and marketing, so brand teams now deal with two sets of decision-makers for the same app [10].
- Updated Community Guidelines took effect on September 13, 2025, with a rules-at-a-glance summary, a unified regulated goods and services policy and an expanded Accounts and Features section covering DMs, comments, LIVE and TikTok Shop [8].
- TikTok began rolling out Footnotes in the US on July 30, 2025, letting eligible users add and rate written context on videos [7].
- In November 2025 TikTok said it would test a Manage Topics control for how much AI-generated content appears in For You, and add invisible watermarks to AI content made with TikTok tools or carrying C2PA Content Credentials; a March 2026 update still described the control as a test [9][14].

SECTION 01

Audit the account promise

Open the profile like a stranger. Is the niche, personality or value proposition clear? Are the bio, pinned videos and recent posts telling the same story?

TikTok can carry individual videos far beyond the follower base, so the profile has an important second job: converting discovery into a reason to follow. If a stranger loves one video, does the profile make it obvious what they will get next?

Check: Do the three pinned videos introduce the current best version of the account, or the one that went viral two years ago? Does the bio name a topic someone would actually search for?

SECTION 02

Check account health before diagnosing reach

Review account standing, Community Guidelines issues, removed content, copyright and music limitations, and any notices affecting recommendations or monetization. An audit that ignores account health is like diagnosing a car without checking whether the engine light is on.

Re-read the guidelines themselves if your team last did so before September 2025. The updated version took effect on September 13, 2025, and expanded the Accounts and Features section to cover safety measures for direct messages, comments, LIVE and TikTok Shop [8]. If the brand sells through Shop or goes LIVE, those rules now apply to the account as a whole, not only to individual posts.

Also check the For You feed eligibility standards. TikTok has listed reposted material with no new creative edits (for example, content carrying another creator's visible watermark), very short clips, GIF-only videos and fake-engagement tactics such as "like-for-like" promises as ineligible for For You. Ineligible content can still be found through search or by following the account [11]. That last detail matters: a video can look fine on the profile and still never reach the feed.

Finally, verify the account type and the tools it has. TikTok Studio replaced the old Creator tools and Creator Center, and its analytics cover account and content performance, audience behavior and monetization, with Creator Academy resources built in [5]. TikTok's support materials also point creators and businesses to account-type settings and analytics [2].

SECTION 03

Map the US rulebook after the joint venture

This section is new because the ownership change is new. TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC was established on January 23, 2026. It protects US user data in Oracle's US cloud, retrains, tests and updates the content recommendation algorithm on US user data, and holds decision-making authority over trust and safety policy and content moderation for the US. TikTok's global US entities keep global product interoperability and certain commercial activities, including e-commerce, advertising and marketing [10].

For a brand, that split is practical: US moderation and trust and safety sit with the joint venture, while ads, Shop and marketing sit with TikTok's commercial side. Record who on your team talks to which side.

Check: Does US reporting mark January 23, 2026 as a break in the trend line? Do brand-safety documents still cite pre-September 2025 policy language?

SENIOR STRATEGIST NOTE

Because the US algorithm is now retrained on US data by a separate entity [10], I split benchmarks: US audience versus everyone else, and pre versus post January 23, 2026. Compare format-level medians across those windows before telling a client their reach was "cut." If only one format moved, it is a creative question. If every format moved by the same amount in the same week, write it down as a platform-level change and stop rewriting hooks to fix it.

SECTION 04

Build a creative inventory by pattern

Pull 50 to 100 recent videos and tag each by **topic, hook type, length, face/talent, format, trend or original concept, sound strategy, CTA, series and whether any generative AI tool was used**.

Then create groups: talking-head explainers, reactive commentary, interviews, listicles, trends, storytimes, behind-the-scenes, photo carousels and so on. Compare the patterns instead of staring at one viral outlier.

A single 8M-view video can hide a weak content system. I care more about **repeatable winners**: formats that reliably beat the account baseline across multiple posts.

SECTION 05

Audit the first seconds, brutally

TikTok is not obligated to wait for your setup. Audit the opening with the sound on and off.

Check: Does the first frame create context or curiosity? Is the first spoken line specific? Does on-screen text add information or simply repeat the caption? How long until the actual payoff begins?

PRO TIP

Take your top five and bottom five videos in the same format and transcribe only the first five seconds. The difference is often embarrassingly obvious once you can see it in writing.

SECTION 06

Audit watch behavior, not only views

Views tell you distribution happened. Watch behavior tells you how the content performed once it arrived.

Look at the retention and completion data in TikTok Studio, plus rewatches, shares, comments and the relationship between video length and audience hold. TikTok's recommendation explainers emphasize interaction signals and give extra weight to finishing a longer video [1][3].

If people consistently leave at the same type of setup, intro or transition, that is creative intelligence. If they rewatch a dense section, that can mean it was valuable or confusing. Read the comments before deciding which.

SECTION 07

Audit discovery signals: search, captions, hashtags and sounds

Do not turn the audit into a hashtag séance. Instead, ask whether the metadata accurately communicates the topic.

TikTok says video information such as captions, sounds and hashtags contributes to recommendation [1], and it lists searches alongside watching, liking, sharing and commenting as interactions that can explain why a video is recommended [3]. So I audit whether creators are naming the thing they are talking about clearly enough for both humans and the platform to understand.

If the content is "how to style a silk press in humidity" and the caption is "y'all asked 😂," we may be making search work harder than necessary.

Check: For the top 20 videos, does the topic phrase appear in at least two of the four places TikTok and viewers can read it: the first spoken line, on-screen text, the caption and the cover?

SECTION 08

Audit originality, AI labels and added context

Originality now shows up in three places at once: For You eligibility, monetization and labeling. Audit them together.

AI-generated content. TikTok requires creators to label realistic AI-generated content and applies labels through creator tools, its own detection models and C2PA Content Credentials. Labels now show whether they came from AI detection, a creator label or TikTok AI tools, and TikTok says more than 1.3 billion videos have been labeled. It also announced invisible watermarking for AI content made with TikTok tools such as AI Editor Pro and for uploads carrying C2PA credentials [9]. Separately, it is testing a Manage Topics control that lets viewers adjust how much AI-generated content they see in For You; the control changes frequency rather than removing the content entirely [9][14].

If viewers can turn AI content down, an account that leans on synthetic visuals is exposed to a preference it cannot see in analytics. Compare AI-assisted videos with the rest of the inventory over the same period.

Footnotes. Since July 30, 2025, eligible US users (accounts at least six months old with no recent Community Guidelines violations) can write and rate Footnotes that add context to videos. A footnote appears when contributors with differing views agree it is helpful, and TikTok said nearly 80,000 people had qualified at launch [7]. For brands making claims about health, money, product performance or news, assume context can be attached. Check whether every factual claim in your top videos has a source you could defend in the comments.

Reposts. Re-uploads with no new edits, including clips with another creator's visible watermark, have been listed as ineligible for For You [11]. Recycled cross-platform content is the first thing I check when reach drops on otherwise healthy accounts.

■ SENIOR STRATEGIST NOTE

Run a ten-video label test. Pull the ten most recent videos that used any generative tool (voice, B-roll, background replacement, AI Editor Pro) and confirm each carries the correct AI label. Then add a column to the production log naming the tool used on every asset. When a label appears that the team did not apply, you can see within minutes whether it came from detection or from C2PA credentials in the source file [9].

■ SECTION 09

Audit search value and monetization fit

When TikTok launched the Creator Rewards Program, it said the program rewards videos over a minute long and that the rewards formula weighs four things: originality, play duration, search value and audience engagement. Eligibility at launch was 18 or older, at least 10K followers and at least 100K views in the last 30 days [6]. Program terms change, so confirm the current version inside TikTok Studio before you set targets.

Even brands that will never take payouts can use those four factors as a scoring map for each series.

- **Originality:** Is the core material shot for TikTok, or recut from another platform?
- **Play duration:** For videos over a minute, where does the retention curve flatten, and does the payoff arrive before it?
- **Search value:** Would someone type this topic into the search bar? Is the phrase spoken and written?
- **Audience engagement:** Are comments asking follow-up questions, or only reacting?

Ask: Which series could run longer than a minute without padding? If none can, plan new ideas instead of stretching 40-second ones.

SECTION 10

Audit trend use: treat the trend as a vehicle

Trends can be useful distribution vehicles. They are not automatically a content strategy.

For every trend-driven winner, ask: what transferable thing actually worked? The sound, the cultural moment, the structure, the joke, the talent, the topic? If the only answer is “the trend was hot,” do not build a quarter around it.

The Creator Academy exists to help creators understand content strategy, community trends, tools and best practices [4], and it is accessible inside TikTok Studio [5]. I use it during the audit to separate current platform behavior from TikTok folklore.

SECTION 11

Audit community signals

Read the comments on repeat winners. Which questions appear again? Which phrases does the audience use? Which commenters are becoming regulars? What video responses could be made from those comments?

TikTok works best when content creates the next piece of content. Comments are a score and a creative pipeline. Since the 2025 guidelines update, comments also sit under the Accounts and Features rules [8], so check moderation settings while you are there.

SECTION 12

Build a testing plan

Your TikTok audit should end with tests that isolate variables. Change one meaningful thing at a time where possible: hook style, length, on-screen text, series format, talent, posting window, search-led topic, trend integration, AI-assisted versus fully shot.

If you change the topic, host, edit style, duration and caption all at once, congratulations: you made a different video. You did not learn which variable mattered. 😂

SENIOR STRATEGIST NOTE

Run length tests in pairs. Cut the same idea at under a minute and over a minute, post them at least a week apart, and judge them on average watch time and shares rather than views. That tells you whether the idea has the substance for longer formats that TikTok’s rewards formula favors [6], before you rebuild a calendar around them.

CREATIVE SPECS

Creative specs and brand consistency on TikTok

Whatever your brand looks like, your templates have to survive captions, the right-side action rail and the username overlay, and still read in the first frame. TikTok does not publish one fixed safe zone: it provides downloadable safe zone files and notes that the safe area changes with orientation, caption length and add-ons such as anchors [12]. Design every template over that file, not over a blank 9:16 rectangle.

ASSET	SIZE / RATIO	SAFE ZONE	PRO TIP
Feed video (organic or Spark Ads)	9:16 vertical is TikTok's recommended orientation; ads accept 540×960 px minimum. I export 1080×1920 [12]	Use TikTok's downloadable safe zone overlay; it varies with caption length and anchors [12]	Make the first frame work as a thumbnail: one claim, number or question, readable on a phone at arm's length. Watch it once on mute before posting.
Non-Spark In-Feed ad	9:16 recommended (16:9 and 1:1 accepted); up to 10 min; 500 MB or less; .mp4/.mov and others [12]	Same overlay; ad captions are white in a fixed font with no clickable links, @ or hashtags [12]	You cannot style the ad caption, so put the offer and any required disclosure in the video itself, inside the safe area.
Carousel ad / photo post	Ads: 720×1280 px vertical recommended (640×640 and 1200×628 also listed); 2 to 35 images; JPG or PNG; music required [13]	Keep type centered; check the crop in-app before publishing organic photo posts	One idea per slide. Slide 1 states the payoff and the last slide gives the next step. Preview every slide on a phone and make sure no text needs zooming.
Profile image	Ad profile image is 98×98 px; keep the key element inside the central 66×66 px [12]	Central 66×66 px area [12]	Use a simple mark or a clear face that still reads at comment size. Skip small wordmarks or taglines inside the avatar.
Account name	One line, up to 20 characters outside CJK languages [12]	n/a	Use the name people would actually search for, and keep it as close as possible to your handles on other platforms.
Pinned covers and series openers	9:16 frame; profile grid crops it, so check in-app	Center the headline vertically	Build one cover template per series with the same text position and series marker, so the profile grid reads like a menu instead of a pile of random frames.

Build your own system for TikTok. Start with one first-frame template per series, saved in your editing tool and built over the safe zone file. Keep the type hierarchy short: one display style for hooks and one body style for supporting text, with a minimum on-screen text size you test on the smallest phone on the team. Pick two or three brand colors plus a neutral, run every text and background pairing through a contrast checker (WCAG's 4.5:1 is a sensible floor for small text), and put a solid or semi-opaque box behind any text that sits over moving footage. Use the same avatar mark you use on other platforms so people recognize you in comments and duets. Give each recurring series a marker that shows up in the first second, such as a spoken opener, a title phrase or a corner tag in the same position, so returning viewers know what they are watching before the hook lands.

Voice by surface. The bio says what the account covers in the words people search for. Captions name the topic plainly first and add personality second. Comment replies should sound like a person answering the actual question, and recurring questions become video replies. DMs and Shop customer service stay clear and specific; a joke is never worth a confused customer. Longer explainers over a minute lead with the claim or number, keep the proof specific and end on a next step. Write a one-page voice guide with two or three example lines per surface so whoever is posting that day gets it right.

Accessibility. Turn on auto captions and correct them before publishing, especially names, numbers and product terms. Keep on-screen text large, high contrast and on screen long enough to read twice. If a key point is only visual, say it out loud or put it in text. Avoid rapid flashing effects.

Consistency without looking like an ad. On TikTok, anything that reads as a polished commercial in the first second gets swiped. Put your consistency in the system (series markers, text style, the color of your text box, a recurring sign-off) and let the footage look native: real people, shot vertically, talking to the camera. If the logo appears at all, put it on an end card or in the profile, not as a watermark over every frame.

■ PRO TIP

Screenshot the first frame of your last 12 videos, lay them out as a 3 by 4 grid at phone size and show it to someone outside the team for five seconds. If they cannot tell what the account covers or which videos belong to the same series, the templates are not doing their job yet.

DO	DON'T
+ Design every template over TikTok's current safe zone file and re-check when captions run long [12]	– Put headlines or stats under the right-side action rail or the bottom caption area
+ Put the claim, number or question in the first frame, readable with the sound off	– Set small or thin text directly over busy footage without a backing box
+ Limit each template to one display style, one body style and a small palette that passes a contrast check	– Open with a branded intro card or logo sting that delays the payoff
+ Use the same series marker in the same position every episode	– Change cover style, type and colors from post to post so the grid looks random
+ Review and correct auto captions before publishing, especially names and numbers	– Rely on the ad caption for offers or disclosures you cannot style or link [12]
+ Label AI-assisted visuals with TikTok's AI label, even when the edit feels minor [9]	– Repost watermarked clips from other platforms as-is [11]

Copyable audit checklist

- ☐ **Profile:** Is the account's value proposition obvious after one good video sends someone to the profile?
- ☐ **Pins:** Do pinned videos introduce the best current version of the account?
- ☐ **Health:** Are there recommendation, copyright, guideline or For You eligibility issues to resolve under the September 2025 guidelines?
- ☐ **US governance:** Do we know which decisions sit with the US joint venture and which with TikTok's commercial side, and is January 23, 2026 marked in our US reporting?
- ☐ **Inventory:** Have I tagged 50 to 100 videos by topic, format, hook, length, talent and AI-tool use?
- ☐ **Hooks:** What do the first five seconds of top vs. bottom performers reveal?
- ☐ **Watch behavior:** Where do viewers stay, leave, rewatch or share?
- ☐ **Discovery:** Are captions, spoken language, on-screen text and hashtags clear about the topic?
- ☐ **Originality and AI:** Are AI-generated or AI-assisted videos labeled, are reposts edited, and could every factual claim stand up to a Footnote?
- ☐ **Search value:** Which series score on originality, play duration, search value and engagement, and which could run past a minute?
- ☐ **Series:** Which formats produce repeatable wins rather than one-off spikes?
- ☐ **Trends:** Am I using trends as a vehicle or letting them become the whole strategy?
- ☐ **Comments:** What audience questions can become response videos or new series?
- ☐ **Creative specs & consistency:** Do our templates sit inside TikTok's current safe zone, read with the sound off, and use our own series markers, type and palette consistently?

☐ **Testing:** What one-variable tests can I run over the next 30 days?

☐ **Actions:** What will I Stop / Start / Continue / Test?

Audit scorecard

AUDIT AREA	WHAT I'M CHECKING	SCORE (1–5)	ACTION / EVIDENCE
Profile promise	Niche/value, pins, conversion from discovery		
Account health	Guidelines, For You eligibility, recommendation/monetization status		
US governance	Joint-venture vs. commercial contacts, appeals path, pre/post Jan 2026 benchmarks		
Creative system	Repeatable formats, topics, talent and series		
Hook strength	First frame, first line, immediate context/payoff		
Watch behavior	Retention, completion, rewatches, shares		
Discovery	Search clarity, captions, sounds, hashtags		
Originality and AI	AI labels applied, repost hygiene, claims sourced for Footnotes		
Search value and rewards fit	Originality, play duration, search value, engagement by series		
Community	Comment quality, repeat commenters, response content		
Creative specs & consistency	Safe zone compliance, first-frame legibility, consistent templates and series markers, captions and contrast		
Testing	Controlled hypotheses and documented learnings		

DECISIONS

How I'd turn this into action

Finish with a one-page decision summary: **three things to stop, three to start, three to continue and three tests to run.** Assign an owner and a date to every test. An audit without a decision is just organized hindsight.

For 2026, add one line: the policy or governance change most likely to affect the account next quarter, and the date you will re-check it.

SOURCES

Official sources and creator resources

Platform features change quickly. This Playbook was checked against official guidance available in October 2026. Verify feature availability inside your own account before treating any tool or metric as universal.

[1] TikTok Newsroom: How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you?lang=en

[2] TikTok Support: Switching to a Creator or Business account · https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/growing-your-audience/switching-to-a-creator-or-business-account

[3] TikTok Newsroom: Learn why a video is recommended For You · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/learn-why-a-video-is-recommended-for-you?lang=en

[4] TikTok Creator Academy / Creator Portal · https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/

[5] TikTok Newsroom: Helping creators bring creativity to life with TikTok Studio (May 24, 2024) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/helping-creators-bring-creativity-to-life-with-tiktok-studio?lang=en

[6] TikTok Newsroom: Introducing the new Creator Rewards Program (March 18, 2024) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/introducing-the-new-creator-rewards-program

[7] TikTok Newsroom: Rolling out TikTok Footnotes in the US (July 30, 2025) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/rolling-out-tiktok-footnotes-in-the-us?lang=en

[8] TikTok Newsroom: Create, discover and connect on TikTok with simpler and stronger Community Guidelines (August 14, 2025) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/create-discover-and-connect-on-tiktok-with-simpler-and-stronger-community-guidelines?lang=en

[9] TikTok Newsroom: More ways to spot, shape and understand AI-generated content (November 19, 2025) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/more-ways-to-spot-shape-and-understand-ai-content?lang=en

[10] TikTok Newsroom: Announcement from the new TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC (January 23, 2026) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/announcement-from-the-new-tiktok-usds-joint-venture-llc?lang=en

[11] TikTok Community Guidelines: For You feed eligibility standards · https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/fyf-standards

[12] TikTok Ads Help Center: TikTok Auction In-Feed Ads specifications · https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/video-ads-specifications?lang=en

[13] TikTok Ads Help Center: Specifications for Carousel Ads · https://ads.tiktok.com/resources/help/article/specifications-for-carousel-ads

[14] TikTok Newsroom: TikTok SSA shares more ways to spot, shape and understand AI-generated content (March 10, 2026) · https://newsroom.tiktok.com/tiktok-ssa-shares-more-ways-to-spot-shape-and-understand-ai-generated-content?lang=en-ZA

OFFICIAL CREATOR RESOURCES TO FOLLOW: @TikTokCreators · TikTok Studio (desktop)

■ ABOUT

About the author

Ashley “AC” Trybula is an award-winning content and audience executive, journalist and media leader working across media, culture, social and the creator economy. Her work spans content strategy, audience development, editorial leadership, video, original programming and digital distribution. She writes about audience growth, social media, digital culture, media leadership and the business of attention.

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