Meta Threads Algorithm: A Reverse-Engineering Report

MARCH 28, 2026

CREATOR GROWTH & TECHNICAL UNDERSTANDING

This report reverse-engineers the Meta Threads algorithm into three actionable sections: **Core Rules**, **Key Criteria**, and **How to Win**. Every factual claim is labeled either **[EVIDENCE]** — deriving from an official Meta source, a published study, or a documented creator experiment — or **[INFERENCE]** — a reasoned conclusion drawn from patterns, analogies, or cross-platform comparisons.

01

Core Rules

What are the fundamental rules of how the system works?

02

Key Criteria

What factors determine success or failure?

03

How to Win

Based on the rules, what are the highest-leverage actions to improve results without spending more?

Core Rules: What the System Is Optimizing For

[EVIDENCE] Meta's official transparency documentation states that the Threads Feed AI system selects, ranks, and delivers content by prioritizing posts predicted to engage users, analyzing hundreds of signals about content and user behavior. Official statements also indicate a commitment to "fostering positive, productive conversations" and enforcing Instagram's Community Guidelines as a baseline.

The algorithm balances three interrelated objectives:

User Retention

Primary, ongoing. Measured by session length and DAU/MAU ratio. The dominant objective at all times.

Content Discovery

Primary, growth phase. Measured by new follows per session. The algorithm still surfaces viral and trending discussions to help users discover new profiles.

Conversation Quality

Primary, stated. Measured by reply depth and reply rate. Suppression of engagement bait signals optimization for *meaningful time spent*, not raw clicks.

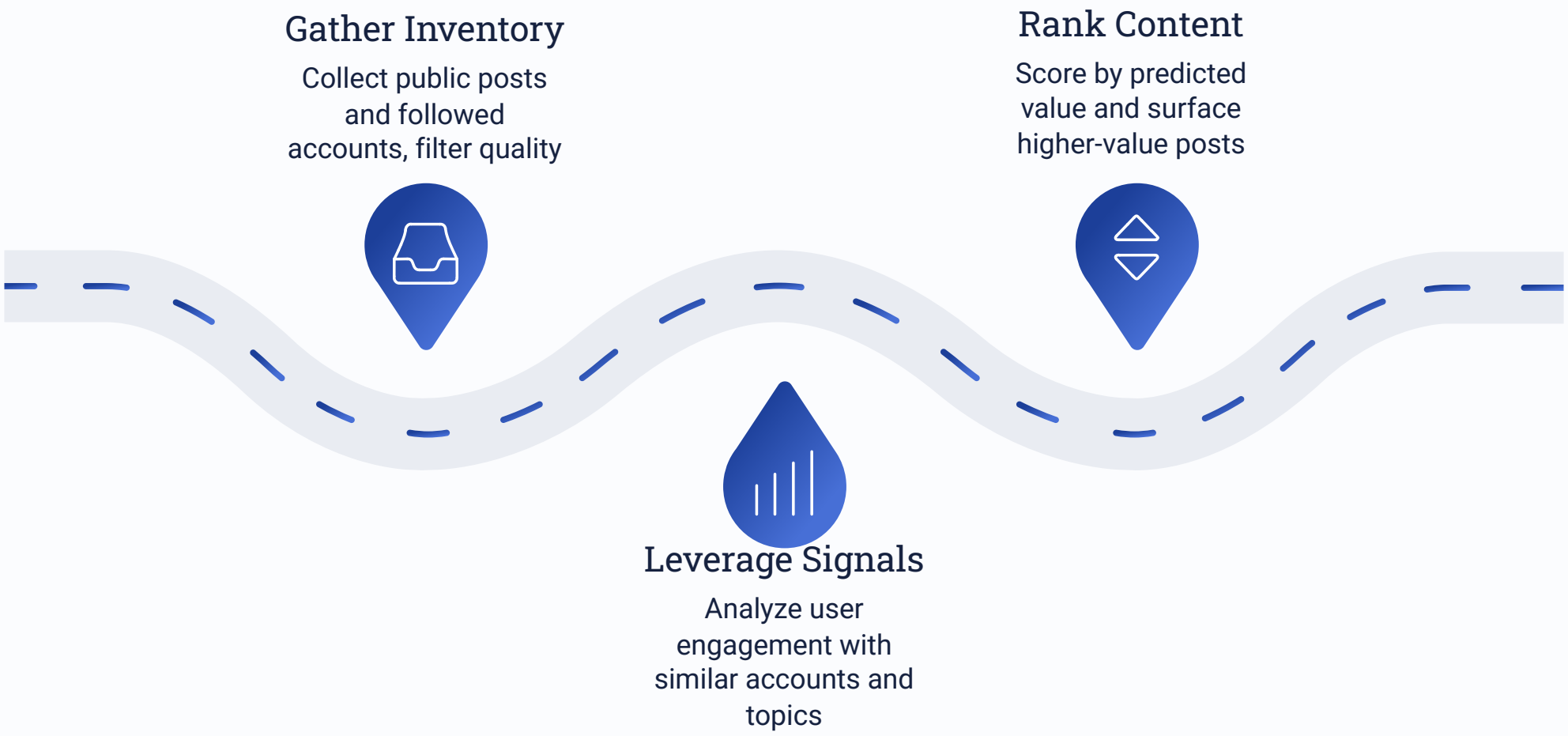
Monetization

Secondary, emerging. Threads Feed Ads launched in 2025. The algorithm is currently in a "growth phase" — reach and discovery are weighted more generously than they will be once ad inventory pressure increases.

[INFERENCE] The emphasis on conversation quality over raw engagement volume signals that Threads is optimizing for a metric closer to **meaningful time spent** rather than raw click-through rate. This mirrors Instagram's shift to prioritize "sends" and "saves" over likes. **Creators who build audiences now are likely to benefit from this window.**

Core Rules: The Three-Step Ranking Process

[EVIDENCE] Meta's official Threads Feed AI transparency documentation describes a three-step ranking process:



This three-step process applies to the **For You** feed. A second feed type — **Following** — operates on strictly reverse-chronological logic, showing only content from followed accounts with recency as the primary signal.

For You Feed

AI-ranked by predicted value. Sources: followed accounts + recommendations. Recency is one of many signals.

Following Feed

Strictly reverse-chronological. Sources: followed accounts only. Recency is the primary and explicit signal.

[EVIDENCE] Threads is Meta's first app designed to be compatible with ActivityPub, the open social networking protocol, allowing users to share content to the fediverse and interact with users on other servers such as Mastodon. A dedicated Fediverse feed operates independently from the AI-ranked main feed. **[INFERENCE]** The AI-ranked main feed remains the dominant surface — the fediverse feed's independence from the ranking system suggests Meta is not yet optimizing for cross-platform signals.

Core Rules: The Recommendation Architecture

```
[All Threads Posts]
        ↓
[Two-Tower Retrieval] → ~1,000 candidates
        ↓
[Early-Stage Ranking (ESR)] → ~100 candidates
        ↓
[Late-Stage Ranking (LSR) – MTML] → Ranked list
        ↓
[Post-Ranking: Diversity + Ads + Policy] → Final feed
        ↓
[Real-Time Feedback Loop] → Updates next session
```

[INFERENCE] Given Meta's unified AI infrastructure strategy, Threads almost certainly adopts a multi-stage funnel similar to Facebook Feed (four steps: inventory generation, signal collection, prediction modeling over 100+ models, and ranking). Instagram's recommendation system has scaled to over 1,000 ML models. The Threads pipeline likely includes:

1

Candidate Retrieval

A Two-Tower model narrows billions of posts to ~1,000 candidates per user per session using User and Item embeddings.

2

Early-Stage Ranking

A lightweight model quickly scores ~1,000 candidates down to ~100.

3

Late-Stage Ranking

A computationally intensive multi-task model (MTML) deeply analyzes final candidates and produces a ranked list.

4

Post-Ranking

Diversity injection, ad interspersion, and policy enforcement produce the final feed.

[INFERENCE] Threads' late-stage ranking model likely predicts several outcomes simultaneously — reply probability, like probability, follow probability, time spent, and scroll-past probability — and combines these into a weighted relevance score. Given Threads' stated emphasis on conversation, **reply probability is likely weighted more heavily than like probability** in the current scoring function.

Key Criteria: The Signals That Actually Matter

[EVIDENCE] Meta's transparency documentation provides unusually granular detail on the specific predictions the algorithm makes and the signals that feed them. These are the most authoritative public source on Threads' ranking logic:

Prediction	Top Input Signals
Likelihood to **like** a post	Feed engagement over past week (time spent, posts liked); media liked in last 15 min; author like rate
Likelihood to **click to view replies**	Reply engagement of descendants (level 2) over past 1h and 6h; user's reply creation history (past week, month)
Likelihood to **follow** the author	Posts seen in feed; recently followed authors; **Instagram profile views of author**
Likelihood to **click author's profile**	Author profile click rate; engagement across modules (past 28 days); page index in feed
Likelihood to **scroll past** (negative)	Time spent on post; whether liked; total post views
Time spent viewing a post	Impressions received; time-spent buckets over **84 days**; device platform; media type history
Time spent on permalink page	Descendant engagement (views, taps) over 1h and 6h; reply time-spent over past month

Key Criteria: What These Signals Actually Mean

[INFERENCE] Several patterns emerge from the signal table that are not explicitly stated by Meta but are strongly implied:

Reply Depth > Reply Count

The algorithm tracks engagement of "descendants within level 2" (replies to replies). A post that generates a genuine conversation thread — not just top-level replies — receives a **compounding signal boost**.

Instagram Cross-Platform Signals Are Active

The algorithm explicitly uses Instagram profile views as a signal for Threads follow likelihood. **Your Instagram authority directly influences your Threads distribution.** A new Threads account with 50,000 Instagram followers will receive algorithmic distribution advantages that a net-new creator cannot replicate.

Time-Spent Is a Long-Memory Signal

The 84-day window for time-spent buckets means the algorithm builds a stable model of each user's attention patterns, **making it harder to game with short-term tactics**.

Engagement Velocity Drives For You Feed Reach

A post that receives 50 replies in 30 minutes is likely to outperform a post that slowly accumulates 200 likes over 24 hours in the For You feed (the algorithmic discovery feed shown to non-followers). **Early engagement on a post triggers real-time amplification within the first hour.**

New Accounts Get an Exploration Window

[EVIDENCE] Creator reports in 2026 note that the Threads algorithm is "actively pushing new creators." This exploration window is likely time-limited — new accounts that fail to generate engagement signals within their first 30–60 days of active posting may lose this advantage and fall into a lower-distribution tier.

[INFERENCE] Negative signals — Unfollow, Hide, Mute, Report — are weighted less heavily than positive engagement signals in the short term, but accumulate over time. Content that is repeatedly hidden or reported by a segment of users likely triggers a suppression flag that limits its distribution to that audience segment — a form of soft shadowbanning that is not officially acknowledged but is consistent with observed patterns.

Key Criteria: What Kills Your Reach

[INFERENCE] Based on synthesized creator reports, the following behaviors consistently suppress reach. These are the algorithm killers every creator must avoid:

Explicit Engagement Bait

"Like if you agree," "Repost this" — officially suppressed per algorithm update notes.

External Links in Post Body

Links that drive users off-platform reduce dwell time and likely trigger a distribution penalty. Post the link in a reply to the main thread instead.

Post-and-Ghost Behavior

Publishing content and then remaining inactive removes the creator from the real-time engagement loop, reducing the velocity signal that drives For You distribution.

Inconsistent Posting Cadence

The algorithm's batch-signal layer builds a model of each creator's posting patterns; sudden gaps likely reduce the baseline distribution score.

On Shadowbanning: Meta does not officially acknowledge "shadowbanning" on Threads. The practical distinction matters: guideline violations require content changes, while engagement suppression requires audience or format changes. Creator reports on Reddit's *r/ThreadsApp* describe sudden drops in engagement, no new followers, and content not appearing in search results — consistent with soft suppression patterns.

How to Win: The 7 Highest-Leverage Tactics

The following tactics represent the highest-confidence recommendations based on the synthesized evidence and inference from this report. No ad spend required.

1 Optimize for Reply Depth, Not Just Reply Count

Structure posts to invite genuine disagreement or follow-up questions, not just affirmative responses. A post that generates a 5-reply conversation thread is algorithmically more valuable than a post that generates 20 one-word replies.

2 Engage Within the First 30 Minutes

The real-time signal layer means that creator activity immediately after posting — replying to early comments, liking replies — feeds back into the engagement velocity signal that drives For You distribution.

3 Keep Links Out of the Main Post Body

Post the link in the first reply and reference it in the main post ("link in first reply"). This preserves dwell time on the main post while still providing the link.

4 Use "Dear Algo" Strategically

Post a "Dear Algo" prompt aligned with your niche to signal your content preferences to the algorithm. Particularly useful after a period of low engagement, as it can reset the recommendation context for your account.

5 Leverage Instagram Cross-Platform Signals

Actively direct Instagram followers to your Threads profile. The algorithm uses Instagram profile views as a signal for Threads follow likelihood, meaning Instagram engagement directly improves Threads distribution.

6 Post Consistently in a Defined Niche

The batch-signal layer builds a stable model of your content over 28–84 days. Niche consistency allows the algorithm to accurately categorize your content and serve it to the right audience segments.

7 Participate in Trending Conversations Early

The For You feed surfaces trending discussions. Posting timely commentary on trending topics — especially within the first hour of a trend emerging — can trigger an engagement velocity spike that amplifies reach far beyond your follower base.

How to Win: The 30-Day Experiment Framework

This framework systematically tests the most high-leverage hypotheses while building genuine audience growth. It is structured in three phases.

Phase 1 · Days 1–10

Baseline Establishment. Post once/day at 9am local. No topic tags, no external links, no self-replies. Track: impressions, likes, replies, reposts, profile visits, new followers daily.

Phase 2 · Days 11–20

Variable Introduction. Days 11–13: add a direct question to every post. Days 14–16: reply to your own post within 5 min. Days 17–19: move links to first reply. Day 20: rest day — post baseline content to reset the signal.

Phase 3 · Days 21–30

Compound Strategy. Apply all validated tactics simultaneously. Increase to 2–3 posts/day. Add 10 outbound engagements/day. Use one consistent topic tag per post. Track week-over-week growth.

[EVIDENCE] Optimal posting times based on a 2026 analysis of over 2.5 million Threads posts: weekday mornings between 6am and 11am yield the highest engagement, with **Thursday at 9am** identified as the peak slot. Replying to comments on your own posts can boost engagement by up to **42%** (Buffer, 128,000+ Threads posts analyzed).

The core testable hypotheses behind this framework:

#	Hypothesis	Variable Tested	Null Hypothesis
H1	Posts ending with a direct question generate ≥30% more replies than declarative posts	Question vs. statement format	No difference in reply rate
H2	Replying to your own post within 5 minutes increases For You reach by ≥20%	Creator self-reply velocity	No reach difference
H3	Posts with external links in the body receive ≤50% of the reach of link-free posts	Link placement (body vs. reply)	No reach difference
H4	Posting at 6–11am on weekdays generates ≥25% higher engagement than off-peak times	Posting time	No time-of-day effect
H5	Accounts posting 3+ times/day for 30 days grow followers faster than accounts posting once/day	Posting frequency	No frequency effect
H6	Posts that generate level-2 replies receive broader For You distribution	Reply depth	No depth effect
H7	Using a specific topic tag consistently for 30 days increases impressions from non-followers	Topic tag consistency	No tag effect
H8	Accounts that engage on 10+ other posts per day grow faster than passive accounts	Outbound engagement	No outbound effect

Metrics to Track & References

Track these metrics consistently to measure the impact of your experiments:

Metric	Tool	Frequency	Why It Matters
Impressions per post	Threads Insights	Per post	Measures raw distribution
Reply rate (replies/impressions)	Manual calculation	Per post	Proxy for conversation quality signal
Profile visits per post	Threads Insights	Per post	Measures authority signal generation
New followers per day	Threads Insights	Daily	Measures discovery effectiveness
For You vs. Following split	Threads Insights	Weekly	Measures recommendation system penetration
Engagement velocity (interactions in first 30 min)	Manual tracking	Per post	Measures real-time signal strength

References

1. Meta Transparency Center. "Instagram Threads Feed AI System." **transparency.meta.com**
2. Meta. "Introducing Threads: A New Way to Share With Text." About Facebook, July 2023. **about.fb.com**
3. Metricool. "How Does The Threads Algorithm Work in 2026?" **metricool.com**
4. Edelman DXI. "Threads Feed Ads Are Here. What Advertisers Need to Know." **edelmanxdi.com**
5. RecurPost. "Meta Threads Algorithm Explained for Better Reach in 2026." **recurpost.com**
6. Meta. "Control Your Threads Feed With New Dear Algo Feature." About Facebook, February 2026. **about.fb.com**
7. Buffer. "Get More Followers on Threads: 10 Tactics to Help You Grow." **buffer.com**
8. Engineering at Meta. "Journey to 1000 Models: Scaling Instagram's Recommendation System." May 2025. **engineering.fb.com**
9. AI at Meta. "The AI Behind Unconnected Content Recommendations on Facebook and Instagram." June 2023. **ai.meta.com**
10. AI at Meta. "Deep Exploration for Recommendation Systems." September 2023. **ai.meta.com**

This report was produced using wide parallel research across five independent research streams, synthesized and verified against official Meta sources. All inferences are clearly labeled and should be treated as hypotheses subject to empirical testing rather than established facts.