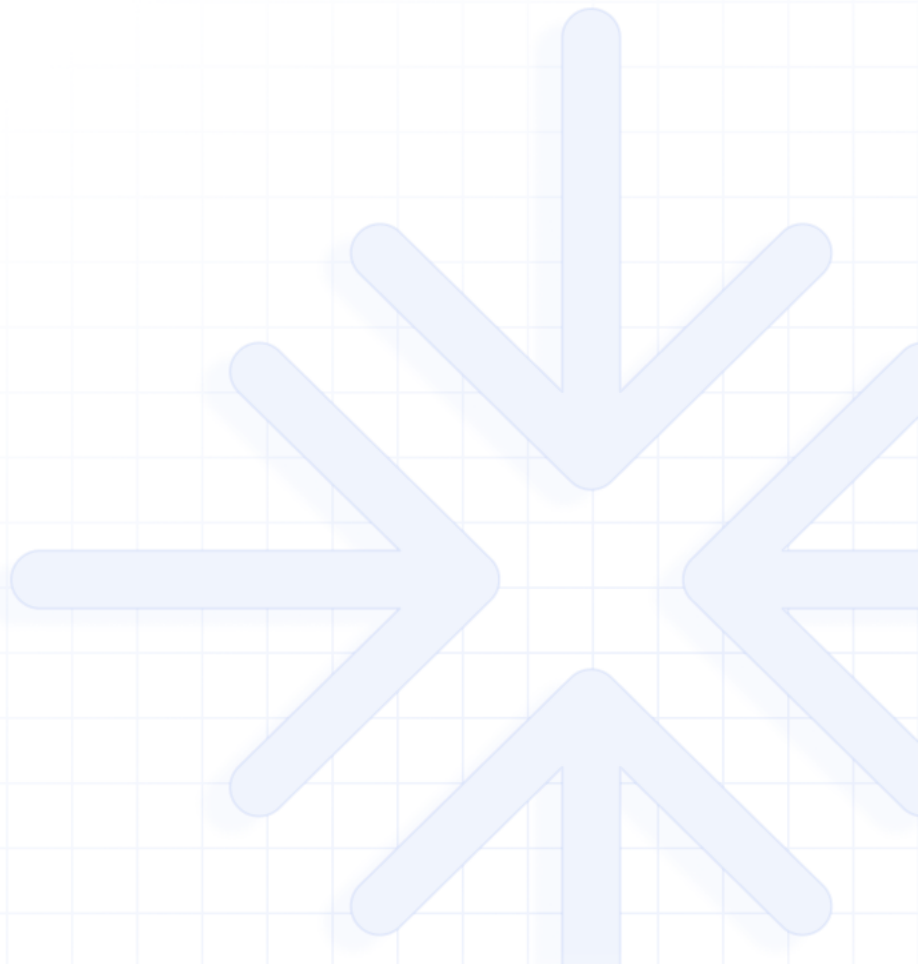


The AI Marketing Readiness Report

Insights from 500+ enterprise CMOs on
the gap between AI expectations and
execution.



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The AI Search Paradigm Shift

The Era of AI-Driven Discovery Is Here. Are CMOs Ready?

The fundamental dynamic of how consumers **discover, evaluate, and choose brands** has been permanently altered. Generative AI platforms - such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Google AI Overviews - have evolved from experimental tools into mainstream discovery engines, radically reshaping the marketing landscape.

Over the past year, we have helped leaders from Fortune 500 organizations navigate this marketing transformation by accelerating their **AI Visibility** through **our data-driven intelligence platform**.

As this shift accelerates, we are seeing a notable shift: AI visibility strategies are now a frequent topic of inquiry for boards and CEOs. Marketing budgets are being reallocated, and competitive dynamics are rapidly changing. Yet, most organizations remain paralyzed, stuck between **understanding the urgency** and **knowing how to execute**.

To better understand this gap and our customers' challenges, we surveyed CMOs at Fortune 1000 companies. The findings reveal a critical yet understandable disconnect: near-universal executive mandates met with fragmented execution and a dangerous confidence-competence discrepancy. While 87% of CMOs have received explicit board or CEO mandates to develop AI search strategies, only 21% have operational practices in place. Even more concerning, 99% of marketing leaders say they're confident in their understanding of what drives AI visibility, yet only 38% have proven strategies backed by results.

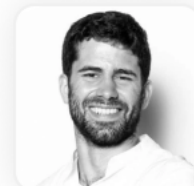
This report examines that gap. It explores where the pressure is coming from, why traditional playbooks are failing, and what sets organizations that capture AI visibility apart from those still planning their first moves.

The consumer shift is already underway. Generative platforms are becoming the **primary interface of discovery**. For CMOs, AI Visibility isn't a future consideration - it's **a present competitive advantage that compounds**.

The organizations that operationalize AI visibility **now** are positioning themselves to capture significant competitive advantages in customer acquisition. **This report is designed to help you become one of them.**

By Imri Marcus,
Co-founder and CEO of Brandlight

Imri Marcus



The AI Search Readiness Crisis

AI-powered search has moved from emerging technology to mainstream consumer behavior. Marketing leaders across Fortune 500 companies now face a critical challenge: boards are demanding AI visibility strategies faster than most organizations can deliver them.

Brandlight partnered with Censuwide to survey 503 CMOs at US companies with annual revenue exceeding \$500M to understand how organizations are responding to this shift. The findings reveal a striking disconnect between executive pressure and operational readiness.

Key Findings

- 87% of CMOs have received explicit CEO or board mandates to develop AI search strategies
- 35% of these mandates include specific timelines and KPIs
- 51% of CEOs ask about AI visibility weekly; 59% of board members do the same
- 68% of leadership teams rate AI search disruption as critical or high concern

The Readiness Gap

- Only 21% have operational AI visibility practices with dedicated teams
- 79% admit they haven't built the infrastructure to prevent competitive displacement
- 83% still allocate less budget to AI search than traditional SEO
- 62% are "testing and learning" rather than executing proven strategies

The Confidence-Competence Paradox

- 99% of CMOs claim confidence in knowing what drives AI visibility
- Only 38% have proven strategies backed by measurable results
- 74% believe traditional SEO practices require major or complete reinvention
- Just 10% have trained their full marketing teams on AI visibility

Early Disruption Is Already Here

- 24% report AI search has materially disrupted their customer acquisition model
- In CPG, 53% report AI search driving 5-10% of overall traffic
- 30% of Financial Services leaders report significant business impact
- 33% of Retail CMOs say disruption is already reshaping their acquisition strategy

The Bottom Line

CMOs are caught between urgent board mandates and operational unpreparedness. The gap between expectations and execution is widening every week. Organizations that close this gap now - by building measurement infrastructure, training teams, and establishing cross-functional alignment - will capture the compounding advantages that come from early AI visibility leadership.

For those still planning, the window is closing fast.

About the Research

The research was conducted by the independent market research consultancy, Censuswide, in partnership with Brandlight. 503 Chief Marketing Officers at U.S. companies with annual revenue exceeding \$500 million were surveyed via online questionnaire in October 2025.

Survey Scope

- **Respondents:** 503 CMOs
- **Company Size:** \$500M+ annual revenue
- **Geographic Focus:** United States
- **Industries Surveyed:** Eight major sectors including CPG, Retail, Commerce, Financial Services, Insurance, Automotive, Beauty, and Technology
- **Timeframe:** October 2025
- **Methodology:** Online survey conducted independently by Censuswide

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society, which is based on ESOMAR principles, and is a member of the British Polling Council.

What Makes This Research Significant:

This is the first comprehensive study of Fortune 500 marketing leadership perspectives on AI-Powered search and brand visibility across generative platforms. Unlike technical audits or consumer behavior studies, this research captures the strategic, operational, and organizational challenges facing marketing executives as they navigate the shift from traditional search optimization to AI visibility.

The timing is critical. The survey was conducted at an inflection point - after generative AI platforms achieved mainstream consumer adoption but before most organizations have operationalized response strategies. This creates a unique window into how marketing leadership is processing disruption in real time.

Boards Are Now Driving the Agenda

AI visibility has moved from a technical experiment to a boardroom priority. CMOs are no longer pitching stakeholders on why AI search matters - they're being asked how soon they can deliver results.

The pressure is coming from the top, and it's relentless:

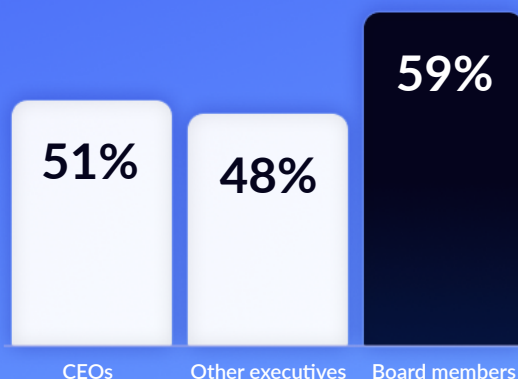
- 87% have received explicit mandates from their CEO or board to develop AI search strategies
- 35% of those mandates include specific timelines and KPIs, not just directional guidance
- 51% of CEOs ask about AI visibility weekly; 59% of board members do the same
- 68% of leadership teams rate concern about traditional search disruption as critical or high

Weekly Board Room Pressure

This isn't exploratory interest. These are operational demands with accountability expectations.

How Often Leadership Asks About AI Visibility?

68%
Rate AI Visibility as High Concern



Industry Variation

The intensity of board pressure varies significantly by sector. CPG leads at 59% citing AI search as a top-3 strategic priority in 2025 - far ahead of other industries. These brands understand that consumer purchase decisions are increasingly influenced by AI-powered recommendations, making visibility in generative answers a competitive necessity.

Retail follows closely, with 33% reporting AI search has already materially disrupted their customer acquisition model. When asked about top concerns, 41% cite measuring revenue impact - more than twice the rate of their next worry.

Even traditionally slower-moving sectors are feeling the heat. Insurance CMOs report weekly board inquiries about AI Visibility, particularly as consumers turn to ChatGPT and Perplexity for policy comparisons and coverage recommendations.

"Boards are treating AI Search Visibility as a business risk, not a marketing experiment. The question for CMOs isn't if it matters - it's whether and how they can operationalize fast enough to stay competitive."

Imri Marcus,

Co-founder and CEO of Brandlight

68% of CMOs rank AI search disruption as high or critical, emphasizing the immediate operational pressure on marketing teams. This isn't future planning - it's crisis response masquerading as strategy.

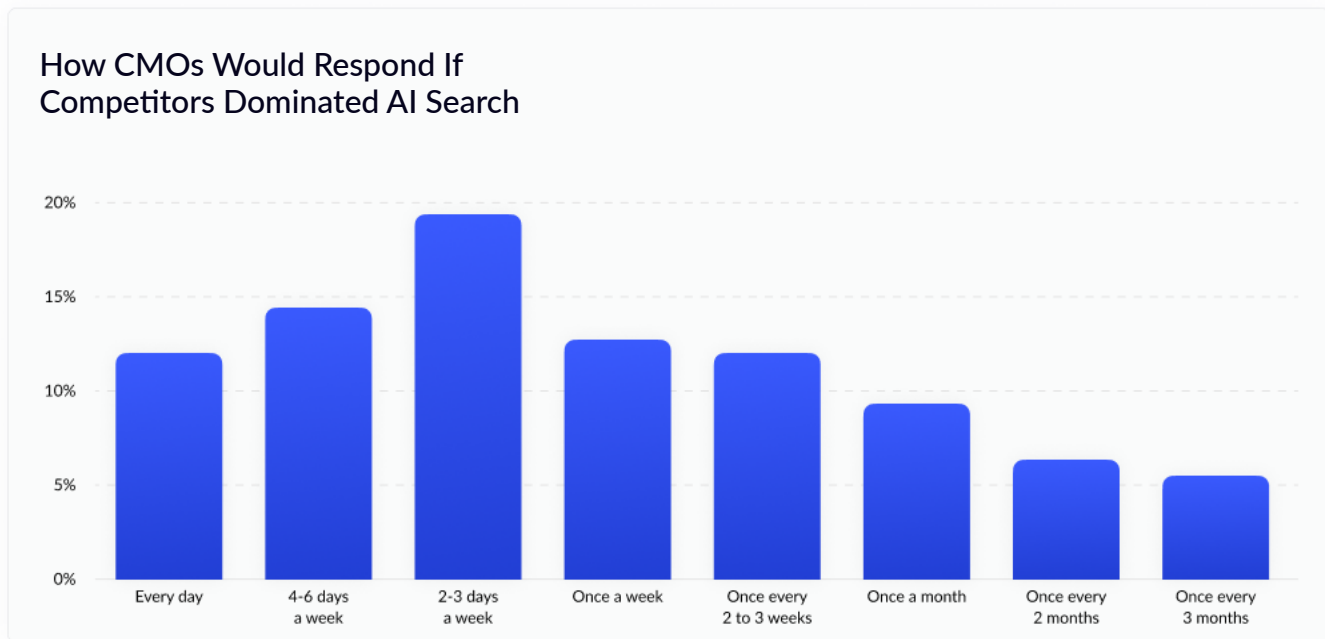
What This Means

The mandate era creates a new dynamic for marketing leaders. CMOs must now balance traditional channel performance with building entirely new capabilities in AI visibility - often without clear ROI models, proven playbooks, or dedicated resources.

The organizations responding effectively aren't waiting for certainty. They're building infrastructure to measure, optimize, and report on AI visibility in real-time, giving leadership the visibility they're demanding.

The Readiness Gap: Mandates Outpacing Capabilities

AI visibility has moved from a technical experiment to a boardroom priority. CMOs are no longer pitching stakeholders on why AI search matters - they're being asked how soon they can deliver results.



The data exposes four critical disconnects

1. The Infrastructure Gap

- 87% have CEO/board mandates to develop AI visibility strategies
- Only 21% have operational practices with dedicated teams and resources
- 79% haven't built the infrastructure to prevent competitive displacement in AI answers

2. The Investment Gap

- 83% still spend less on AI search than traditional SEO
- 71% are dedicating just \$100K-\$500K to AI optimization in 2025
- For companies with \$500M+ revenue, these aren't transformational investments - they're hedging bets

3. The Ownership Gap

Ownership of AI search strategy shows near-perfect fragmentation across six different groups, each claiming roughly equal responsibility.



4. The Readiness Gap

Perhaps most telling: **78.7% of CMOs would respond with crisis or high urgency** if a competitor started dominating AI search results - yet most haven't built the systems to detect when that's happening, much less prevent it.



Industry Reality Check

This readiness gap manifests differently across sectors:

Leading: CPG and Beauty treat AI visibility as table stakes for consumer relevance. These sectors show the highest rates of audit completion (68% have conducted AI visibility audits) and operational readiness.

Lagging: Insurance and Commerce cite limited AI traffic as justification for slower movement, despite clear signals that consumer behavior is shifting rapidly. This "wait and see" approach ignores how AI visibility advantages compound over time.

The brands building authority and optimizing for visibility today are capturing share of voice that becomes harder to displace over time. By the time you're reallocating budgets in crisis mode, the competitive advantages have already compounded. The brands that will own the next decade of customer acquisition are the ones building AI visibility infrastructure today - not the ones planning to respond with urgency tomorrow.

What Separates Winners from Laggards

The organizations already seeing results share three characteristics:

- 1. They moved fast.** They didn't wait for perfect playbooks or proven ROI models. They understood that speed beats perfection when ecosystems evolve this rapidly.
- 2. They built infrastructure.** They can measure what's working, track competitive positioning, and optimize in real-time. They treat AI visibility as a system of record, not a side project.
- 3. They mobilized internally.** Winning in AI search isn't a channel tactic - it's cross-functional. The brands seeing results have aligned go-to-market, product, content, and analytics teams around a unified approach.

"The consumer shift is here. The data proves it. The question is: are you building the infrastructure to win in it, or are you waiting until it becomes a crisis?"

Imri Marcus,

Co-founder and CEO of Brandlight

Confidence Is High, But Competence Is Lagging.

This is the report's most dangerous finding: the confidence-competence gap.

Expertise in AI visibility is not yet widespread. Traditional SEO teams weren't designed for a world where large language models act as discovery agents, synthesizing information and providing recommendations on behalf of users.

What CMOs Say vs. What They Know

99%

Claim Confidence

38% Have proven strategies

44% Still testing/learning

18% Experimenting

The Confidence Problem

- **99% of CMOs say they're confident** in knowing what drives AI search visibility
- **Only 38% have proven strategies** backed by measurable results
- **The remaining 62%?** They're "testing and learning" (44%) or "experimenting with different approaches" (18%)
- **Only 10%** have trained their full marketing teams.
- **Training ranks lowest (11%)** among investment priorities.

This confidence-competence gap is the report's most dangerous finding. Organizations are moving forward with strategies built on assumptions, not evidence.

This training gap hits hardest in Retail and Financial Services, both sectors that are already experiencing early disruption in search traffic and customer acquisition. Organizations across these industries report feeling caught between urgent board mandates and marketing teams still operating with SEO-era playbooks.

Tools without fluency create dashboards that no one can act on. Organizations are investing in visibility and monitoring platforms but:

- Not working with the right AI Visibility partners to determine which high-leverage strategies can drive the most impact.
- Not building the internal capability to interpret insights or execute optimization strategies.

"You can't dashboard your way into AI visibility. That is why we are not just an intelligence and SaaS solution; we are a partner. Achieving visibility requires people who truly understand how these engines decide and rigorously investigate where the puck is going. At the enterprise level, organizations must invest in training alongside better tools and partners. Without that holistic approach, you're flying blind."

Imri Marcus,

Co-founder and CEO of Brandlight

Five Strategic Imperatives for Marketing Leaders

The gap between board expectations and marketing capabilities won't close on its own. CMOs must take deliberate action to build the operational infrastructure, team expertise, and measurement systems that AI visibility demands.

Here are the five strategic imperatives for 2026

1. Audit Your Visibility

Know your brand's "share of answer" across AI platforms.

You can't optimize what you can't measure. Conduct comprehensive audits of where - and how - your brand appears across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google AI Overviews, and other generative platforms.

Key actions

- Map your brand's visibility across the engine, and prioritize unbranded queries analysis
 - Identify gaps where competitors are cited instead of you and your relative competitive positioning
 - Understand the context in which your brand appears (or doesn't)
 - Establish baseline metrics for tracking improvement over time
-

2. Reframe Measurement

Move from clicks to citations.

Traditional metrics - rankings, impressions, click-through rates - don't capture what matters in AI search. The new currency is citations: being named, recommended, and contextualized within AI-generated answers.

Key actions

- Shift KPIs from traffic-based metrics to visibility and citation metrics
 - Track "share of voice" in AI answers for your category
 - Measure citation quality: Are you mentioned in purchase-consideration contexts or just awareness queries?
 - Connect AI visibility metrics to downstream business outcomes (pipeline, conversions, revenue)
-

3. Break Down Silos

Treat AI visibility as a cross-functional initiative, not a marketing experiment.

AI visibility isn't a channel tactic that lives within one team. It requires coordination across content, product, engineering/developers, PR, support, and customer success. Fragmented ownership creates fragmented results.

Key actions

- Establish clear ownership with cross-functional accountability - successful enterprise customers create task forces dedicated to AI Visibility.
 - Align content, technical SEO, and brand-building efforts around AI visibility goals
 - Involve product teams in ensuring AI platforms surface accurate information
 - Create feedback loops between customer success and content teams to identify high-value topics
-

4. Invest in Capability

Training isn't optional - it's the only defensible advantage.

AI visibility requires specialized expertise that traditional SEO teams don't have. You can't dashboard your way to success. You need people who understand how generative models decide what to say and who to cite - partner with AI Visibility providers that offer strategic recommendations and assign you an AI Visibility strategist.

Key actions

- Train your full marketing team to develop AI fluency, not just a specialized subteam.
- Invest in continuous learning as platforms evolve (what works today may not work in six months)
- Build internal centers of expertise rather than relying solely on external agencies
- Make training a budget priority, not an afterthought

Only 10% of surveyed organizations have trained their full teams. This creates a compounding disadvantage as AI search scales.

5. Allocate Intentionally

Balance tool investment with internal expertise.

Tools provide visibility. Expertise provides action. The most effective organizations invest in both simultaneously as AI Visibility becomes a marketing channel on its own.

What CMOs Must Do in 2026

Key actions

- Prioritize enterprise-first AI visibility monitoring and measurement platforms
 - Dedicate budget to content optimization and technical infrastructure
 - Don't neglect training and capability development
 - Set realistic budget expectations: 71% are allocating just \$100K-\$500K in 2025, which may be insufficient for \$500M+ revenue organizations
 - Start thinking about the future of AI Search & Marketing (eg. Agentic Shopping, AI Advertising, etc).
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Close the Readiness Gap. Build Visibility Infrastructure. Win the AI Search Era.

The findings in this report clearly demonstrate the urgency: boards are demanding AI visibility strategies, but most marketing organizations lack the infrastructure, expertise, and a trusted partner to guide them in this journey.

Brandlight provides the marketing operating system CMOs need to close the readiness gap and capture compounding advantages in AI-driven discovery.

Our Approach

1. Visibility Audits & Competitive Intelligence

- Comprehensive audits of your brand's presence across 12 AI Engines and emerging platforms
- Competitive benchmarking: where you appear vs. where competitors get cited
- Category share-of-voice analysis to identify gaps and opportunities
- Tracking infrastructure for continuous monitoring

2. Strategic Roadmaps & Executive Reporting

- Board-ready AI visibility strategies with clear KPIs and success metrics
- Frameworks for connecting AI citations to business outcomes (pipeline, conversions, revenue)
- Reporting dashboards that marketing leadership can understand and act on
- Dedicated AI Strategist to help you maximize your AI Visibility investment.

3. Cross-Functional Enablement

- Team onboarding programs that build internal AI visibility expertise
- Cross-functional workflow design (content, SEO, product, engineering/dev, PR)
- Centers of excellence development for sustainable capability building
- Ongoing consultation as platforms and best practices evolve

4. Optimization & Execution

- Content optimization for AI citation and contextual relevance
- Technical infrastructure improvements to ensure AI platforms can access and understand your content
- Authority-building strategies that increase citation likelihood
- Continuous testing and refinement as AI Visibility success factors evolve

Improve your AI Visibility with Brandlight

Why leading brands choose Brandlight

Brandlight helps enterprises become the #1 name mentioned by AI. Marketing teams use us to track, optimize, and grow their presence across AI surfaces search engines - unlocking new revenue and customer acquisition.

- ✓ **The most comprehensive platform for AI Visibility**
Track branded and unbranded presence, sentiment, and competitor positioning across 11+ AI engines.
- ✓ **Actionable insights, not just analytics**
Receive clear recommendations for content, PR, and partnership opportunities to boost visibility fast.
- ✓ **AI Technical Optimizations**
Enhance AI crawlability, align with LLM algorithms, and structure data for discovery.
- ✓ **Statistically robust data, not just snapshots**
A robust AI engine dataset spanning the entire buying journey, geographies, languages, and ICPs.
- ✓ **Built for the Enterprise**
SOC 2 compliant, built to scale across languages, regions, and business complexities.
- ✓ **Strategic partnership that drives outcome**
From training to strategy, get expert guidance that turns AI visibility into measurable impact.

Trusted by the world's best brands and their teams

ESTÉE LAUDER



The Hartford

Teneo

Xebia

STAGWELL

MICROCHIP

* Kimberly-Clark

Charter COMMUNICATIONS

AUCTANE

aetna

GoTo

Your New AI Marketing Operating System

Brandlight is the complete solution that helps you build a new AI Marketing channel - fast.



AI Visibility & Tracking

Establish baselines of branded and unbranded visibility, and monitor shifts by engine, funnel stage, and region. Benchmark sentiment and performance against competitors while identifying the sources shaping how AI models describe your brand.



Content Creation & Distribution

Leverage a personalized content dashboard to understand what works, what doesn't, and why - while reverse-engineering competitor successes into actionable recommendations. Measure the impact of your content on AI citations, sentiment, and rankings to drive continuous optimization.



Content Partnerships

Identify the potential undervalued publishers, affiliates, and platforms likely to boost your AI visibility. Discover who to partner with and where to place content, using real citation and influence data from AI engine outputs.



Technical Analysis

Pinpoints backend and metadata improvements that make your site more crawlable, ingestible, and trustworthy to AI models - so AI engines can find, understand, and best use your assets.

AI Ads, Commerce and more

Our platform answers existing challenges and expected ones. AI Visibility is only act one. The entire marketing funnel is shifting due to AI and we're committed to providing our partners with solutions and insight to pre-empt and prepare.



"With Brandlight, we can finally quantify and improve how our brand appears in AI-driven discovery. It's not just data - it's clarity that directly impacts revenue opportunities, competitive positioning, and how we show up for customers in the new search landscape."

Aaron Goldman
CMO, MediaOcean

"Brandlight has proven to be the most comprehensive solution for our team - giving us clear visibility into how our brand shows up in AI discovery and measurement, and translating those insights into actionable recommendations."

Kady Srinivan
CMO, You.com



Get started

Connect with Brandlight to explore how we can support your use case. Together we can:

- Conduct an AI visibility audit for your organization
- Benchmark your competitive positioning
- Demo the Brandlight platform
- Advise on your highest leverage AI Marketing strategies to boost your visibility

Visit [Brandlight.ai](https://brandlight.ai) to schedule a consultation with an AI expert.

About Brandlight

Brandlight is the AI Marketing platform built for enterprise brands navigating the shift from traditional search to generative discovery.

We help Fortune 500 marketing leaders measure, optimize, and own their presence across AI-powered platforms like ChatGPT, Claude, and Google AI Overviews - turning AI citations into competitive advantages that compound over time.

Founded by AI and search veterans who saw the paradigm shift coming, Brandlight provides you with the measurement infrastructure, strategic guidance, and operational expertise that CMOs need to close the readiness gap and win the AI Visibility era.

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