

THE BOTTOM LINE SERIES

AI Playbook: Understanding How AI Finds and Recommends Businesses

What business leaders **must** know
about getting found, understood
and trusted by AI-powered search.

PHOEBE YONG

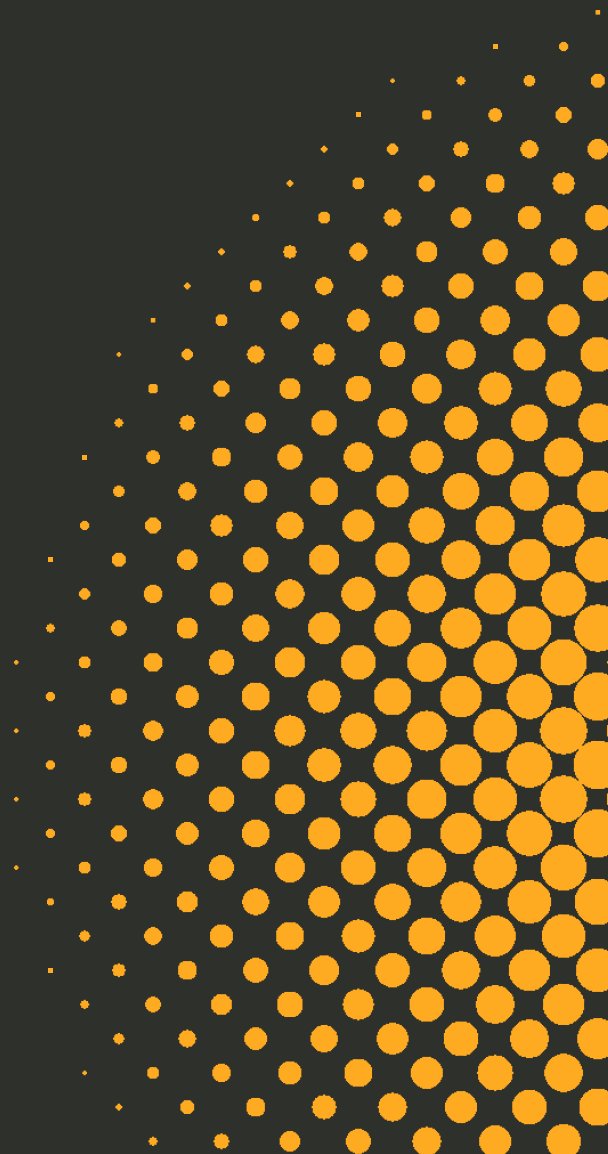


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Before You Start.

Search is changing quickly, and so is the advice surrounding it.

This edition of **The Bottom Line** is designed to help business and marketing leaders cut through the noise and understand what AI-powered search means for visibility, reputation and discovery.

It is not a technical guide or a formula for ranking in AI. It is a practical look at what is changing, how to assess your own business and where marketing leaders should focus next.





CHAPTER ONE

**BEING FOUND LOOKS
DIFFERENT NOW.
IS YOUR BUSINESS **READY?****

Key Takeaways

- Think beyond rankings and backlinks. Strong SEO still matters, but ranking well does not guarantee your business will appear in an AI-generated answer.
- Search the way your customers ask questions. Test problems and needs, not only the keywords your SEO strategy targets.
- Check what AI understands about you. Being found matters less if your expertise, services or positioning are misunderstood.

From Searching for Answers to Getting Answers

For more than two decades, search marketing has had a relatively straightforward goal: when someone searches for a product, service or answer related to your business, you want your website to appear prominently.

That isn't going away.

But AI is changing how people search. Instead of entering a few keywords, opening multiple websites and piecing together an answer, people can ask increasingly specific questions in everyday language and receive a synthesized response. For businesses, that changes what it can mean to be visible.

USE CASE: Consider the Difference

Imagine you lead marketing for a law firm in Canada and you're looking for software to help manage the firm's finances.

With traditional search, you might type:

"best accounting software law firm"

This relies heavily on keywords to help traditional search engines like Google surface a broad range of options that may match your needs.

Compare that with conversational AI search, where you can be far more specific about exactly what you're looking for:

"What software would you recommend if I need accounting, time tracking, and integration with our existing billing system?"

Instead of searching through a list of potentially relevant results, the user is asking for a recommendation tailored to their specific needs and context.

AI SEARCH IS ALREADY MAINSTREAM

Google reports
2.5 billion+ monthly AI
Overviews users and 1
billion AI Mode users
(June 2026)

Why This Matters

A business can have a strong website, quality backlinks and a solid SEO program. All of that remains valuable, but marketers now have another question to ask:

When someone asks AI about the market we compete in, what does it know about us?

- Does it understand what you do?
- Does it associate you with the expertise you want to own?
- When someone asks for businesses like yours, are you part of the answer?

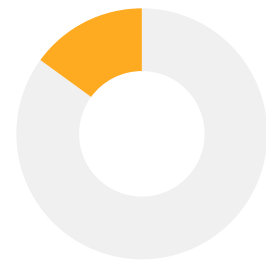
The way people search is **evolving**. So is the impact on businesses



Pew Research Center found that when a Google AI summary appears, users click a traditional search result in:



8%
when an AI
summary appeared



15%
when no AI
summary appeared

THE BOTTOM LINE

Being searchable is no longer the whole story.

As AI becomes part of how people research and compare businesses, visibility increasingly means being found, understood and supported by credible information across the web.





CHAPTER TWO

HOW DOES AI GET TO KNOW **YOUR** BUSINESS?

Key Takeaways

- Think beyond your website. AI-powered search can draw on information about your business from across the web.
- Check for consistency. Your services, expertise and positioning should tell a consistent story wherever your company appears.
- Build proof outside your own channels. Credible third-party sources can add important context about your business.

Your Website Is Only Part of the Picture

AI-powered search can use websites, news, industry publications, and other public information. There is no single AI search index. Your business may be visible in one AI experience and absent from another.

USE CASE: When the Web Tells Two Different Stories

A cybersecurity company positions itself as a specialist in enterprise cybersecurity for financial institutions. However, older articles and third-party profiles still describe it broadly as an IT services provider.

The problem: The company knows how it wants to be positioned, but the wider web doesn't consistently reinforce that position.

The takeaway: Updating your website matters, but your broader digital footprint should tell the same story.

Credibility is much stronger when it doesn't come entirely from you.

Independent sources provide additional context. An executive quoted in a respected publication, industry recognition, expert commentary or a customer success story featured by a trusted partner all contribute information that doesn't come solely from your marketing.

Where AI Gets Its Information From

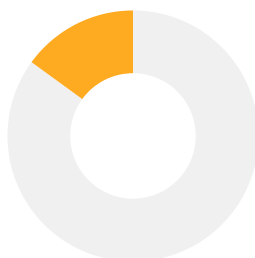
In B2B AI search, More than 60% of citations come from user-generated and peer-review sources, not company websites



47.5%

User generated
platforms

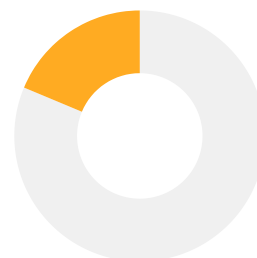
e.g. LinkedIn,
Reddit, forums etc



15%

Peer review sites

e.g. Industry publications
and third party sites



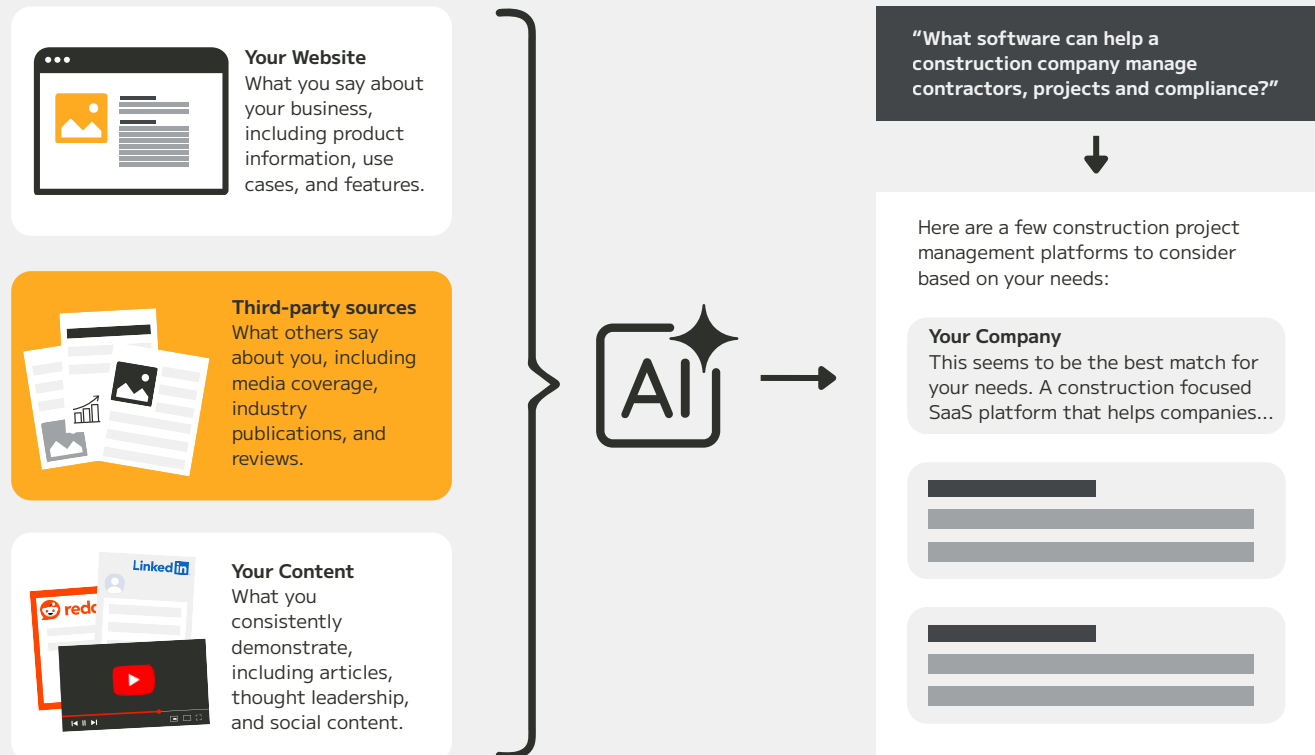
18.7%

Company websites

A Strong Digital Presence Is Key

Media coverage isn't a shortcut to an AI recommendation. But a strong digital presence gives both people and AI more information to understand who you are, what you do, and what you're known for.

Example: A B2B SaaS Company



THE BOTTOM LINE

Your website tells your story. The wider web helps establish your reputation.



CHAPTER THREE

WHY SOME COMPANIES GET RECOMMENDED

Key Takeaways

- Make it easy to understand what you do. Clear positioning and consistent information help establish what your business is known for.
- Connect your experts to your expertise. Thought leadership, interviews and industry participation can reinforce the subjects your company wants to own.
- Don't look for one magic tactic. Focus on building a clear and credible digital presence rather than trying to manipulate an algorithm.

Being Known Isn't the Same As Being Recommended

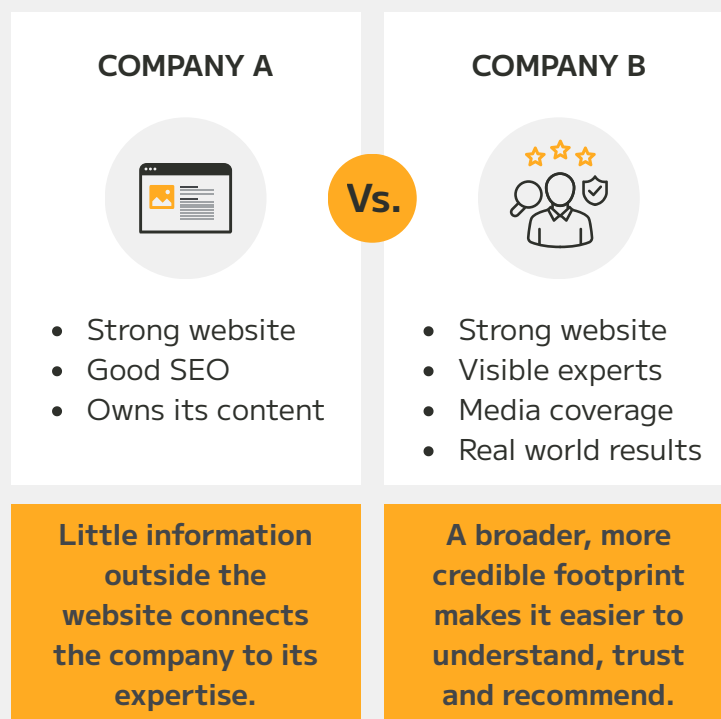
An AI platform may know your company exists and accurately describe what you do. That doesn't necessarily mean you'll appear when someone asks:

Which companies should I consider for this problem?

For marketers, the better question isn't how to "rank" in AI. It is: Are we making it easy for AI, and potential customers, to understand why our business is relevant?

USE CASE: Two Companies. Same Market.

Consider two cybersecurity companies competing for financial services clients.



One company may simply be easier to understand and validate from the information available online.

100 SaaS companies were tested against 42 buyer-intent queries across AI-powered search. Only 47 were recommended. 53 never appeared at all.

Relevance Needs Evidence

Optimizing your website matters, but so does building a credible digital footprint that demonstrates your expertise and reinforces what you want to be known for.

If you want to be known for something, make the supporting evidence easy to find. It may come from:

- Media coverage
- Executive commentary
- Useful content
- Customer stories
- Industry recognition
- Speaking appearances

None guarantees an AI recommendation. Mentions and citations can shape an AI answer without a site visit. Therefore, accurate and consistent evidence across the web matters.

AI visibility should not be treated as an SEO-only challenge.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't chase the recommendation. Build the evidence.



CHAPTER FOUR

PUTTING YOUR BUSINESS TO THE TEST

Key Takeaways

- Search like a customer. Test natural questions about the problems you solve.
- Compare your results. Look at who appears, how competitors are described and what they are known for.
- Test across platforms. AI-generated answers vary, so don't rely on one search or platform.

Try It Yourself - Ask AI

TEST 1: "What does [Company Name] do?"

Is the answer accurate and current? If not, what's missing?

TEST 2: Remove your company name:

"Which companies should a [type of customer] consider for [problem]?" Do you appear? If not, who does?

TEST 3: "Compare [Company] with [Competitor A] and [Competitor B]."

Look at what AI associates with each company and which differentiators it recognizes.



- AI recognizes our business
- We appear for relevant category or problem-based searches



- Credible third-party information about us exists
- Our expertise is associated with relevant topics



- We appear when users ask for companies in our category
- AI can explain why our company may be relevant



- AI understands who we serve and what we do
- Our expertise and differentiators are clear

What Supports the Answer?

Where sources are provided, examine them. Are there credible third-party sources? Is the information current? What sources appear for competitors?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't assume you're visible. Test it. A few well-designed searches can reveal where your business is represented well and where there may be gaps.





CHAPTER FIVE

WHY GOOD COMPANIES GET OVERLOOKED

Key Takeaways

- Don't confuse expertise with visibility. Deep experience may not translate into visibility.
- Look for what's missing. AI can describe your business accurately while overlooking an important specialization.
- Watch your competitors. Another company may simply have a clearer digital footprint around the topic.

Being Good at It Isn't the Same As Being Known for It

A company can have decades of experience, strong results and a well-optimized website, yet still be overlooked.

Often, the problem is the gap between what they know internally and what is visible externally.

Common Gaps

Your positioning is too broad

A law firm may have deep expertise in intellectual property, while describing itself as providing "comprehensive legal solutions."

Accurate? Yes. Distinctive? Not particularly.

Look for: important expertise hidden behind broad company language.

Your expertise lives inside the company

Executives may know the industry exceptionally well but rarely publish, speak or contribute commentary.

Look for: valuable expertise with little public evidence attached to it.

You're relying on owned content

A strong website and blog matter. But if almost everything about your expertise comes from your company, the broader picture may be limited.

Look for: a lack of credible third-party context around your expertise.

The web remembers the old you

Companies evolve faster than their digital footprints. Old profiles and articles may continue telling a previous version of your story.

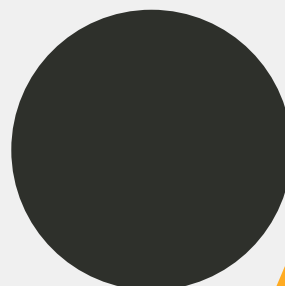
Look for: outdated descriptions that no longer reflect the business.

A competitor is more visible around the topic

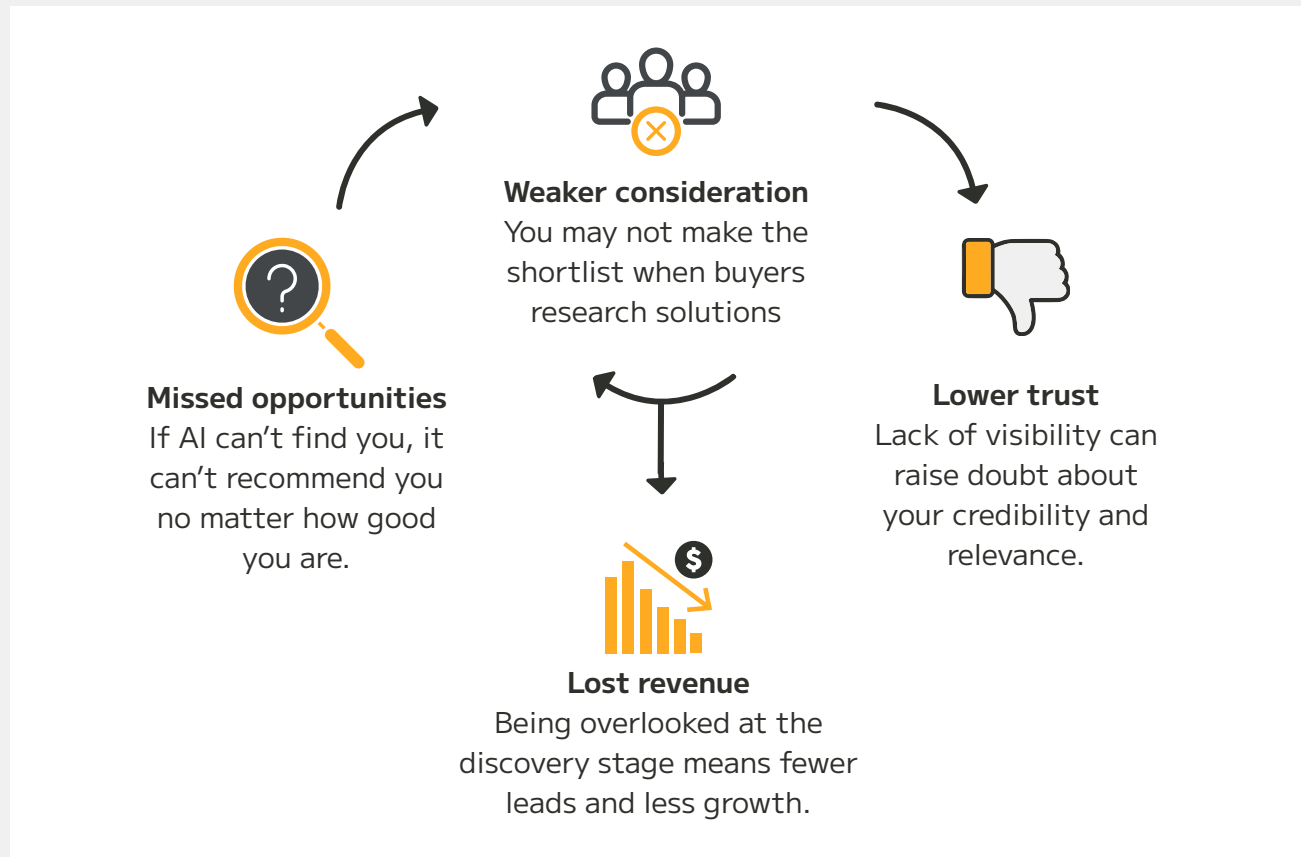
Sometimes you aren't doing anything wrong. A competitor may simply have built more visible authority around a topic.

What to look for

Subjects where competitors consistently appear and you don't.



The Impact of Being Overlooked



The Good News?

Visibility gaps can be found by looking at where your business is missing from the conversation. As the above image shows, these gaps can translate into missed opportunities which can directly impact revenue. Identifying where and why those gaps exist gives you a clearer picture of what needs to change to improve your visibility in AI search

THE BOTTOM LINE

Being overlooked doesn't necessarily mean being less qualified. The question is whether the expertise and reputation inside your business are also visible outside it.



CHAPTER SIX

WHAT LEADERSHIP TEAMS SHOULD DO **NEXT**

Key Takeaways

- Start with what you want to be known for. Don't begin by creating a separate "AI marketing strategy."
- Make your expertise visible. Ensure your website, content, people and external reputation reinforce the same areas of expertise.
- Bring marketing disciplines together. Search, content, PR and executive communications should support the same business priorities.
- Keep testing. Treat AI visibility as another source of market intelligence.

Start with Your Business. Not AI

The rise of AI-powered search makes it tempting to create another marketing program. Resist that temptation.

Your first question shouldn't be: "How do we optimize for AI?"

It should be:

"What do we want our business to be known for?"

Then determine whether your digital presence supports that answer.

1. Establish what you want to own

Identify the markets, problems and expertise most important to growth.

"Technology leader" is broad.

"Helping financial institutions modernize legacy payment infrastructure" gives your organization something much clearer to build around.

2. Make that expertise easy to find and validate

Check your website, content, customer proof and executive profiles.

Then look beyond your own channels.

Search helps people discover you. Content demonstrates what you know. PR, thought leadership, speaking opportunities and industry participation can provide additional evidence and context.

These aren't separate solutions to an "AI problem." They are components of a strong digital reputation.

3. Monitor how the market sees you

Periodically repeat the tests from Chapter 4.

Compare platforms. Track which competitors appear. Watch for outdated information and changes in how your company and experts are described.

Treat the results as market intelligence, not a vanity ranking.

And remember that your ultimate audience is still human. Create useful expertise, answer real customer questions and make your value clear.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't build your business for AI. Build a reputation AI can understand.

Be clear about what you stand for. Make your expertise visible. Build credibility beyond your own channels. Then regularly check whether the market, including AI-powered search, sees the business you believe you've built.

Ready to Take Control of Your AI Visibility? Lets Talk.

If this guide raised questions about how your organization appears in AI-powered search, Magnolia can help you take a closer look.

Learn more about how [Magnolia](#) brings together search, content, PR and digital strategy to strengthen how businesses are found, understood and represented across the web.



