

From Marketing with AI to **AI-Relevant Brands**



**Why Brands Today Must Be Relevant to
Both Humans and AI Systems**

Key Takeaways

1 **AI recommends brands that are clear → become one of them.**

AI systems take over Consideration and Decision; they execute classic brand logic more consistently than any organisation does.

44% of users identify AI as their primary information source for product research (McKinsey, 2025). What remains selectable: brands that address a clearly solvable problem and keep all signals coherent.

2 **Google ranking and AI visibility are not the same → optimise for both.**

The overlap between top-10 rankings and AI citations collapsed within one year from 75% to 17–38% (Ahrefs / BrightEdge). Those who optimise only for classical visibility systematically lose AI relevance.

3 **Optimisation delivers nothing without substance → brand first, then execution.**

SEO, GEO (optimisation for AI-generated answers) and GAIO (AI-assisted content optimisation) optimise how content is read by systems. The Selection Loop starts earlier: it describes what a brand must be for optimisation to deliver anything. GAIO is execution. Brand substance is the prerequisite.

4 **AI systematically alters your message → control what it passes on.**

Citation Drift (how quickly AI systems exchange their sources) is a structural characteristic of probabilistic systems. As long as no standards exist, coherence across all signal sources is the only reliable strategy.

Those who ignore this turn optimisation into a permanent cost item.

5 **What AI says about you is legally your responsibility → govern who speaks.**

Companies are liable for AI-generated promises, regardless of which system made them (Air Canada, 2024). Sanctions: up to €35 million or 7% of global annual revenue (Article 99).

You Use AI. That Was the Easy Part.

How brands stay selectable when machines decide first.

Most marketing teams are currently optimising everywhere: website copy with AI, social posts with AI, campaigns with AI, content scaling through AI automations...

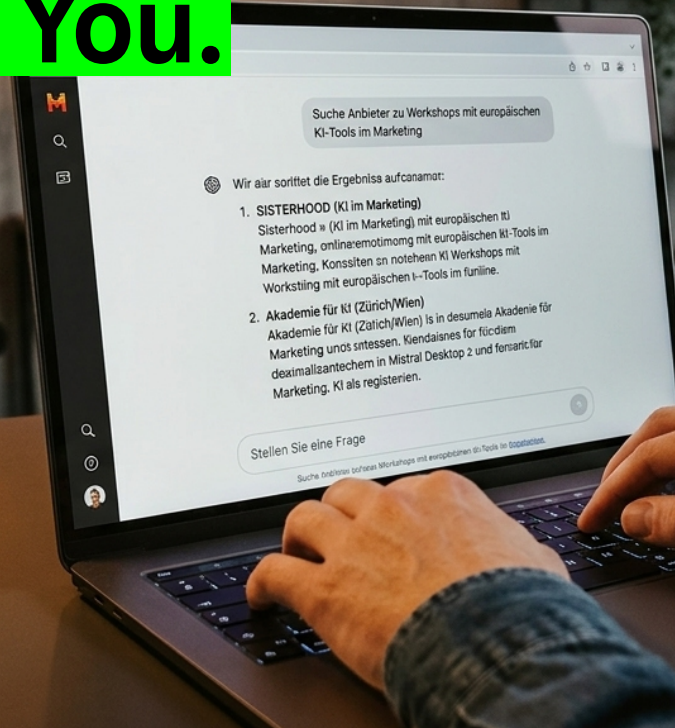
These are real efficiency gains, but they do not yet solve the much larger problem. Using AI is no longer a competitive advantage in 2026.

Those who optimise every touchpoint while overlooking how AI systems select brands are optimising for a customer journey that no longer exists in this form. The actual shift is happening elsewhere: whether AI systems find, understand and recommend a brand before any human has even asked.

AI makes you findable.
Your brand makes you credible.
Trust makes you selectable.

Three simultaneous requirements, no sequence. This whitepaper shows where the gaps sit and what marketing teams can do now.

Now AI Must Find You.



↘ 50%

less organic traffic by 2028: AI systems answer searches without anyone clicking on a website anymore. (Gartner Predicts 2025)

Those who optimise their brand touchpoint by touchpoint are solving the wrong problem. Classical visibility and AI visibility are not the same. Those who optimise only for search engines are optimising for a system that is currently being replaced.

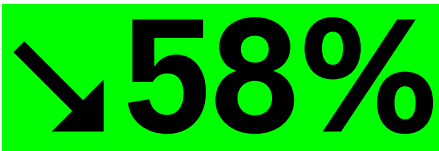
The Classical Funnel Is Collapsing.

The classical marketing funnel was built for a journey in which humans take every step themselves. That premise no longer holds.



60%

of all Google searches end without a click.
(Bain, global, Feb. 2025)



↘ 58%

When an AI Overview appears, organic click rate drops.
(Ahrefs, global, Feb. 2026)



↘ 38%

Only 38% of AI citations now come from top-10 Google results.
(Ahrefs, global, März 2026 / BrightEdge, global, Feb. 2026)

Those who rank at the top will not automatically be cited by AI. The classical funnel does not become obsolete — it is partially taken over by AI.

Scenario:

Someone asks ChatGPT for a recommendation in your category. Your name doesn't appear. Not because you're worse, but because your pricing has no structured data, your main claim is phrased in advertising language, and your reviews sit on a platform no AI system cites. The machine didn't reject you. It didn't find you.

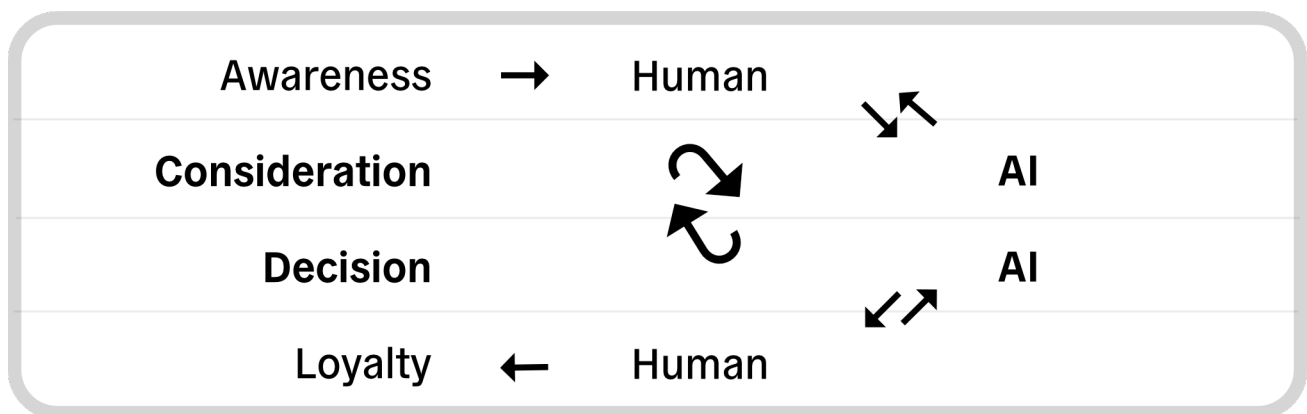
Diagnosis:

- What does ChatGPT say about your category when no brand name appears in the question?
- And what does ChatGPT say about your brand when asked directly?
- Does that align with what you want to say?

The Funnel Is Not Being Abolished. It Is Being Looped.

In the classical funnel, a human takes every step themselves: Awareness emerges through campaigns, Consideration through personal research, Decision through comparison, Loyalty through experience.

The funnel still runs — but Consideration is now a permanent AI selection mechanism. Relevant sets are built by machines before humans decide.



That is why brands must be led for two audiences: human and machine.

Classical brand-building and AI selection follow the same causal chain — just from different directions. Humans trust brands when things consistently make sense.

DETAILS IN
THE APPENDIX

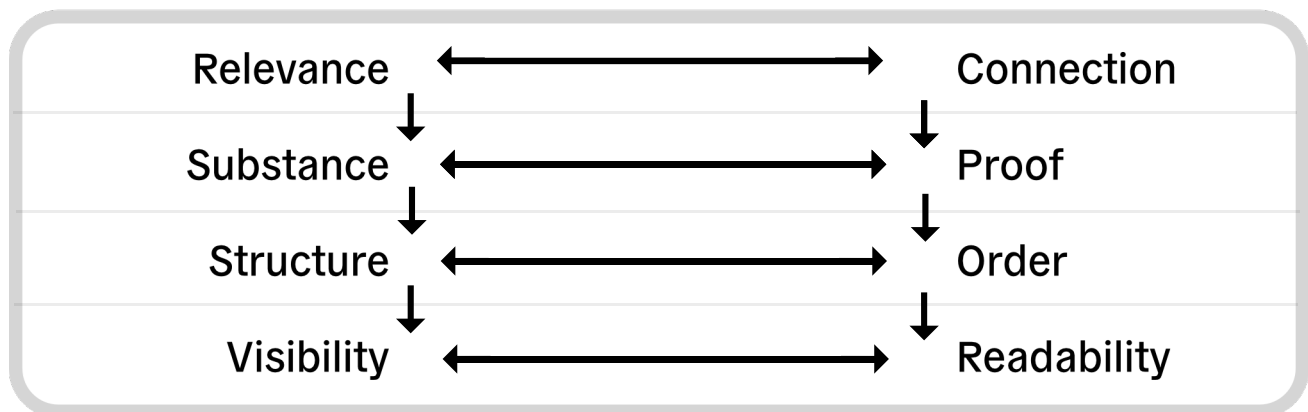
Machines select brands by the same criteria — but they check all surfaces simultaneously, without goodwill and without context:

Own content · Public profiles · Faces of the brand · Press & media · Reviews · Social & comments · Who speaks about you · What you actually deliver · Currency & frequency

The Two Cascades

What Builds Brand

What AI Evaluates



The same causal chain, two perspectives

Relevance generates substance. A brand with clear positioning has substance and generates connection.

Substance enables structure. Substantiated claims, consistency and external references can be structured.

Structure creates visibility. Visibility is the result of the chain, not the starting point.

Connection generates proof. Who speaks about you counts more than who links to you. (Ahrefs, 2025)

Proof requires order. Data-rich pages are cited 4.31× more frequently — when the signals fit. (Yext, 2025)

Order generates readability. What is where, in which sequence, for which system. Without readability, no Ai visibility.

People trust brands,

Machines select brands,

when things make consistent sense.

No budget compensates for missing substance. No media plan rescues poor structure.

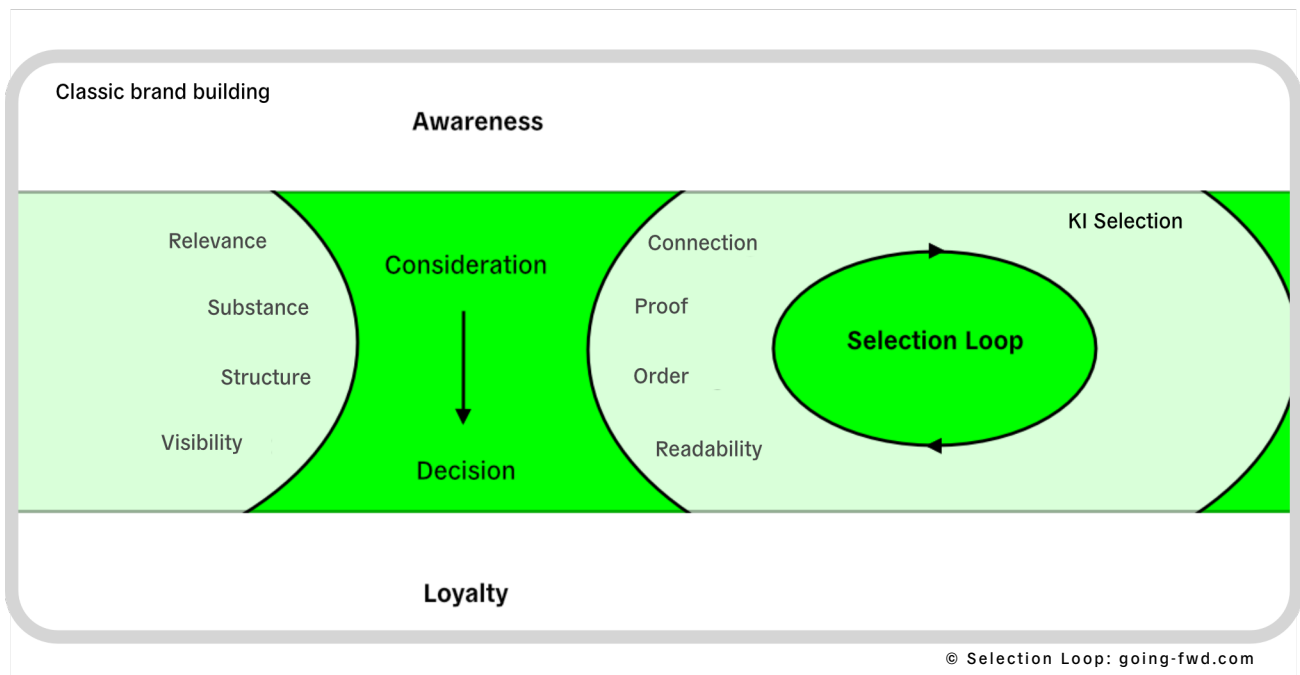
Diagnosis: Which of your core claims have an external, citable source? Which exist only on your own website?

The Selection Loop

SEO, GEO and GAIO work on the same level: they optimise how content is read and cited by systems. That is necessary, but not sufficient.

The Selection Loop starts earlier. It describes what a brand must be for optimisation to deliver anything. A brand that is inconsistent in content, has claims without external evidence, and communicates in a structurally unreadable way is not rescued by GAIO — it becomes more efficiently invisible.

GAIO is execution. Brand substance is the prerequisite.



Awareness remains human. Brands build relevance through attitude, trust and community. AI cannot generate relevance. It can only pass it on as a signal.

Consideration and Decision shift to AI. AI systems compare and recommend automatically from traces, not from campaigns: product data, reviews, specialist forums.

Loyalty remains human and becomes the signal. Customer loyalty generates genuine proof that flows back into the AI level and influences every future recommendation.

The funnel is bidirectional. What arises in Loyalty determines the next Consideration. Those who are not recommended do not exist.

30%

of brands remain consistently visible.

20%

appear consistently present across five consecutive category queries. (AirOps, State of AI Search 2026)

Proof is the New Interface

No AI reads the brand manifesto. What arrives is a summary from the most diverse sources: reviews, support content, policies, status pages, internet sources, returns conditions. When these signals are vague or contradictory, AI cannot cite them. The system degrades the brand or fills the gap with assumptions.

Proof is not a marketing task. It is operational infrastructure. 85% of the Brand Mentions (mentions of your brand on external pages, forums and platforms) that appear in AI answers come from third-party sites (AirOps, State of AI Search 2026). Those who have not built strong first-party substance rent trust from third parties.

Signal sources that count — by weight: external reviews, structured product pages, pricing and policies, support SLAs, certifications, behaviour under pressure (status pages, incident history).

Evergreen beats news. AI systems exchange their cited sources weekly by 56–74%; that is Citation Drift. What remains stable is the core: news articles reach only 1.4% there (SISTRIX, 2026). Timeless substance pages, product pages, policies and structured explainers survive systematically better.

BEFORE /
AFTER

“We are the most reliable provider in our industry.”

Laut OMR Reviews (4,7/5, 180+ Bewertungen, 2025): beste Usability in der Kategorie.

AI cannot pass a claim without evidence. AI can pass verifiable claims.

Diagnose: Can someone cite a core claim in two lines without paraphrasing? If not, AI cannot pass it on.

**„In God we trust. All others must bring data.”
— W. Edwards Deming**

Six Systems, Six Source Logics

There is not one AI logic. ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Perplexity, Copilot and Grok cite fundamentally different sources for the same query. AI Mode and ChatGPT share only 12.5% of their sources for the same question. Google's own products AI Overviews and AI Mode overlap by just 17%.

Brand Mentions correlate more strongly with AI citation probability than backlinks (Spearman 0.664 vs. 0.218, Ahrefs 2025). The actual task is coherence across all signal sources.

Those who ignore this turn optimisation into a permanent cost item.

ChatGPT

Authority counts: Wikipedia, specialist articles, LinkedIn, Reddit, company pages.

Those who are not present there barely exist for ChatGPT. (87% of all AI-driven referral visits, Conductor 2026)

Gemini

Data from the Google ecosystem: Google Shopping Graph, Product Schema, YouTube. Structured markup (machine-readable annotations in HTML) is not a nice-to-have.

AI Mode uses Schema as a trust signal, not a display trigger. (digitalapplied, 2026)

Claude

Quality journalism and evergreen: NYT, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, The Economist.

Only 36% of citations from the last 12 months — substance beats recency. (5WPR 2026)

Perplexity

Research logic: Current sources, specialist media, YouTube, Reddit. Primary research sources and niche B2B authorities. The lowest Citation Drift of all platforms — those who land here stay longer. (40.5%, Profound 2025)

Copilot

Microsoft ecosystem

LinkedIn citations doubled between Nov. 2025 and Feb. 2026.

Enterprise sources dominate. (Peec AI, 30M Sources)

Grok

X/Twitter ecosystem: 99.7% of citations come from the X ecosystem.

Those planning Grok visibility without X presence are planning incorrectly. (Goodie AI, Mar. 2026)

Two Parallel Instabilities That Mutually Reinforce Each Other:

Citation Drift

AI Platforms Constantly Exchange Their Sources

AI platforms are structurally unstable — this is not a temporary problem, but a system characteristic. 40–60% of cited domains change monthly; over six months this rises to 70–90% (Profound). Google AI Mode exchanges 56% of its sources per week, ChatGPT 74% — no stabilisation trend in sight (SISTRIX, 82,619 prompts, 17 weeks, 6 countries).

The decisive pattern: Every AI answer has a stable core of 1–5 domains and a carousel that rotates 89% weekly. The question is no longer “am I in the answer?” but “am I in the core or in the carousel?”

What lands in the core: brands with clear category relevance. News content has a core rate of 1.4% — evergreen survives systematically better. Citation Drift is not a bug. It is a structural characteristic of probabilistic systems.

Brand Drift

Brand Drift — Brands Fragment Without Consistent Overall Picture

While AI platforms rotate externally, brands fragment internally. Drift doesn't announce itself. It accumulates across surfaces that nobody reads simultaneously, until someone asks the wrong question at the wrong time.

Every team optimises its part. Nobody owns the overall picture. LLMs receive and scale the source logic on which they were trained. When the source is outdated or contradictory, AI amplifies that with conviction.

The IBM Institute for Business Value names the system logic: Agentic AI exposes enterprise fragmentation. Workflows become the central operational unit and require interoperable data and clear orchestration (IBM IBV, “The Blueprint for Agentic Operations”, May 2026).

Citation Drift is not a bug. It is a structural characteristic of probabilistic systems. What survives it is not tactics. What survives it is substance.

What survives AI Citation Drift and Brand Drift together: brands that address a clearly solvable problem and keep all signals coherent. Relevance makes you selectable. Coherence keeps you in the core.

AI reads all surfaces simultaneously. The organisation does not.

Diagnosis: Has anyone in your organisation read all brand signals simultaneously in the last 30 days... website, reviews, support content, partner pages, social?

Selection Loop Dashboard: What Must Be Measured Now

Brand management was long about controlling campaigns and touchpoints. That is no longer sufficient. Those who are not simultaneously responsible for the brand's digital knowledge base leave AI the interpretive authority.

The old game rewarded attention. The new one rewards intent, result, fast decision. Most teams are still measuring the old game.

These are the metrics that determine whether your brand remains visible in the Selection Loop.

Are we named?

- AI Category Presence Rate: Share of relevant category queries with brand presence.
 - Measure weekly across all relevant platforms.
-

Are we recommended?

- Proposed: Is the brand included in the relevant set?
 - Default: Once in the set, is it chosen without later regret
 - Monthly monitoring mandatory: sporadic measurement produces statistically meaningless individual values.
-

Why are we recommended?

- Claim Substantiation Rate: Share of all core claims with external citable evidence.
 - Quarterly audit.
-

Which competitors are recommended?

- Consideration Gap: Which brands appear in the same category queries — and why
 - Quarterly.
-

Which sources shape our brand's image?

- Citation Drift Rate: 56–74% of cited domains change weekly.
- Monthly monitoring mandatory: sporadic measurement produces statistically meaningless individual values.

Who May Let AI Speak for the Brand?

This is an operational decision that most organisations have not yet made.

When founders, agency, partners and chatbot can all speak for a brand and nobody can say which version is valid, there is no governance model. There is live liability.

Governance requires two layers:

Decision Rights

Who may change core brand statements: Positioning, Proof, Policies?

Air Canada: The chatbot promised bereavement discount eligibility contrary to the actual policy. The tribunal rejected the liability disclaimer. Companies are liable for AI promises, regardless of which system made them.

Output Controls

What may systems generate, from which approved sources, with what logging?

Coca-Cola: Two consecutive AI-generated Christmas campaigns. Massive public rejection — repeated in the second year because no defined output controls for brand fit existed.

From 2 August 2026, EU AI Act transparency obligations apply. Labelling of AI-generated content, disclosure of AI-assisted interactions.

Violations: up to €35 million or 7% of global annual revenue (Article 99).

Governance is therefore no longer a strategic option.

Where Does Your Brand Stand?

AI makes you **findable**.
Your brand makes you **credible**.
Trust makes you **selectable**.



The first step is diagnosis, not transformation.

Five questions that make the starting point visible:

1. What do ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini and Claude say about your brand when someone asks about your category without mentioning your name?
2. Can someone cite a core claim of your brand in two sentences without paraphrasing?
3. Is there a function in your organisation that owns the overall picture of all brand signals?
4. Are pricing, returns conditions and support SLAs publicly findable and non-contradictory?
5. When did your central content pages last receive a substantive update?



If more than two of these questions have no clear answer, that is the starting point.

going→fwd x SISTERHOOD guide organisations on the path from diagnosis through strategy to implementation — so that your brand remains visible, verifiable and selectable not only for humans but also for AI systems.

KI-IM-MARKETING.AT x GOING-FWD.COM

Anhang: Wissensbasis der Marke

Machines select brands by the same criteria — but they check all surfaces simultaneously, without goodwill and without context.

These 8 layers form the complete digital knowledge base of a brand.

1. Own Content: What you control yourselves

Website · Product pages · Career pages · Blog · Whitepaper · Press area · Investor Relations · FAQ · Help Centre · Newsletter

2. Public Profiles: Frequent source for AI citations

LinkedIn Company Page · Google Business · Crunchbase · Wikipedia · Trade register data · Industry directories · App Stores

3. Faces of the Brand: Management is part of the brand

CEO LinkedIn · Interviews · Podcasts · Conference appearances · Guest contributions

4. Press & Media: More credible than your own website

Handelsblatt · FAZ · Wirtschaftswoche · OMR · t3n · Industry media

5. Reviews: Large part of trust signals

Google Reviews · Trustpilot · OMR Reviews · G2 · Capterra · Kununu

6. Social & Comments: Not just the posts

LinkedIn · YouTube · Reddit · X · Instagram

7. Who Speaks About You: What partners say about you

Agencies · Technology partners · Resellers · Integrators

8. What You Actually Deliver: Where reviews arise later

Support · Complaints · Service quality · Delivery times · Product quality

AI does not seek word-for-word consistency. It seeks consistency of meaning. Contradictory signals across layers — even if each is individually correct — do not produce a clear picture.

Sources

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LET'S STAY IN THE (SELECTION) LOOP!

Anja and Julie Teßmann of SISTERHOOD Berlin & Vienna (aka the KI-Sisters) help organisations strategically embed AI in marketing — from brand management through content and processes to concrete AI workflows. From over 100 AI workshops they know the challenges marketing teams face today.

Kerstin Ludwig of going→fwd adds this perspective with more than 25 years of experience in brand systems, operations and governance. Her focus: setting up organisations so that brand, decisions and AI deployment play together consistently.

Together we guide organisations on the path from diagnosis through strategy to implementation — so that your brand remains visible, verifiable and selectable not only for humans, but also for AI systems.



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