



THE **DECISION SEQUENCE**
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

THE DECISION SCIENCE SERIES

Artificial Intelligence Reads You Before the Buyer



DS 15

AI-Mediated Discovery

- A Strategic Resource by Joe Worden | More @ www.thedecisionsequence.com

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AI-Mediated Discovery and AI Search

Forrester · Semrush · Gartner · NIST AI RMF · Aggarwal et al. (GEO)

Definition. AI-mediated discovery is the quiet shift where a buyer's first encounter with a firm is often not a homepage, a pitch deck, or a salesperson, it's a machine. Search assistants and AI tools now handle the opening stretch of the decision, they surface options, condense them into summaries, line them up side by side, and translate "expert" material into something a buyer can act on. The implication is plain: the first steps in trust now happen in a layer the firm neither owns nor fully observes, and can't reliably steer.

The Introduction Nobody Wrote

A while back I started opening client engagements with a simple exercise. Before we talk about your marketing, let's read the introduction your buyers are getting. I ask a few AI assistants the questions a real prospect would ask: what does this firm do, who is it best for, how does it compare to the alternatives.

Then I read the answers to the room, out loud.

The first time I did this, the silence was something you could pour. The machine's introduction was confident, fluent, and about eighty percent right, and the missing twenty percent was the exact twenty the firm considered its edge. Their specialty was described a category too broad. Their proudest engagement was nowhere. One answer leaned, at length, on a review thread nobody in the room had ever seen.

Somebody finally asked the right question: "Who wrote that?" And the honest answer was: everyone and no one. The machine had assembled their introduction from whatever the public record offered, and the firm had never once read its own most-delivered pitch.

That's the new condition in one sentence. Your most-delivered pitch is one nobody at your firm has ever heard. The research below says exactly how that happened, and how much of the decision now rides on it.

The Search Now Starts with a Machine

If you want the cleanest signal, Forrester provides it. The State of Business Buying, 2026 draws on a survey of nearly 18,000 buyers worldwide and lands on a simple finding: generative AI has become the front door for business research. In the underlying data, genAI tools show up as the most frequently named meaningful interaction used to research a purchase. And AI is no longer a niche assist, close to everyone, about 94 percent, uses it somewhere along the way. The first pass, the stage that used to be spread across a firm's website and clarified by a rep's explanation, is increasingly completed inside the tool.

But Buyers Still Validate With Humans

None of this means the machine has taken over the decision. The same Forrester research points to a persistent caution: buyers don't fully trust what AI tells them. Some finish the process feeling more assured because genAI helped them orient, but a meaningful slice, about one in five, walk away less confident, after running into gaps, errors, or information that doesn't hold up.

So they compensate in a very human way. They take the machine's output, then run it through people they trust: peers, domain specialists, and their own internal buying circle, often around a dozen stakeholders, plus a handful of outside voices. A useful shorthand is this: AI increasingly influences the consideration set, while human trust still decides the winner. The system narrows the field. People make the call.

Your Reputation Is Built From Sources You Don't Own

Once the machine becomes the early interpreter, the next question is obvious: what is it reading, and whose words is it repeating. Semrush's 2026 AI Visibility Index, built on an analysis of 126 million AI search prompts, argues that a firm's AI-facing story is no longer assembled primarily from its own site and polished, controlled materials. Reviews matter. Community threads matter. Independent publishers matter. Industry sources, trade commentary, and third-party explainers all get pulled in, blended, and reissued as "the" description of a brand.

Semrush also separates two things many teams still treat as the same. Being mentioned in an AI answer is one outcome. Having your own site cited as the source is another, and on some platforms the overlap between those outcomes is surprisingly small.

Two practical implications follow. First, coherence starts to matter in a new way. When many independent sources describe a firm similarly, the machine tends to repeat that picture with

confidence. When the signal is scattered, the brand can be distorted, diluted, or skipped altogether.

Second, visibility is still a blind spot for a lot of organizations. Semrush reports that close to half of marketing leaders can't reliably measure how their brand appears in AI answers in the first place. You are being characterized in spaces you can't walk into, and often without instruments that tell you what was said.

A New Discipline, and a Readiness Gap

As a result, a new body of work has started to gather around "being findable" to generative systems. The paper that effectively put a name on it, "GEO: Generative Engine Optimization" (Aggarwal et al., 2024), shows how generative engines assemble responses by synthesizing across sources rather than simply ranking pages, and it reports that intentional methods can materially increase how often, and how prominently, a particular source gets pulled into answers. In practice, being readable to the machine is becoming its own craft, adjacent to classic search, but not the same thing.

In parallel, guardrails are being sketched out. NIST's AI Risk Management Framework offers a voluntary approach for trustworthy AI, organized around governing, mapping, measuring, and managing AI risk. Yet ambition is outrunning preparedness. Gartner's 2026 CMO Spend Survey captures the mismatch: around seventy percent of marketing leaders say becoming an AI leader is a critical goal, while only about thirty percent say they are ready to scale it. Adoption is moving quickly. Discipline is struggling to keep pace.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

The older model of market entry assumed something comforting: a firm controlled its introduction. It chose the wording, set the timing, and shaped the first impression.

AI disrupts that premise. Prospects, and the machines they consult, interpret a firm's public signals before the firm shows up in the conversation, and in many cases they decide whether the firm gets into the conversation at all. That is why public expertise, plainspoken clarity, consistency across sources, source authority, and structured thought leadership are no longer just outputs for "marketing." They function as Decision Architecture, the raw inputs a machine uses to represent a firm at the opening of the trust sequence.

What hasn't moved is the endpoint. Across the research and inside the framework, the pattern holds: buyers still face uncertainty, still look for verification from trusted sources, and still need enough confidence to commit.

AI speeds up research. It doesn't speed up belief. The firm that is clear, consistent, and credible enough that a machine can portray it accurately earns the chance to be considered. The firm that reads as vague or contradictory to the machine gets screened out before the human part of the decision even starts. The environment shifted. Trust did not.

The Marketing Read

Your firm now has two websites: the one you built, and the one the machines assemble from everything everyone else says about you. Only one of them gets read first, and it isn't yours.

So make the audit a ritual, and run it before spending anywhere else. Monthly, ask the major assistants the questions your buyers ask: best firms for this problem, compare us to the two competitors, what does this firm do and who is it for. Log the answers. Track what changed. That transcript is the most-read marketing asset you have, and until you're reading it too, your positioning strategy is a rumor about a document you've never seen.

Then feed the machine coherence, because Semrush's finding is a gift once you see it: the machine repeats with confidence whatever the record says consistently. One firm, one story, told the same way on your site, your bios, the directories, the press quotes, the conference listings. Every contradiction in the public record, the outdated specialty, the partner bio from two positioning strategies ago, is noise the machine averages into your introduction.

Invest in the sources the machine trusts more than it trusts you. Mentions come from the third-party record: trade press, reviews, community threads, independent explainers. This is Entry 08's borrowed trust, replayed for a machine audience, and it means a placed article in a publication the machines read can outwork ten posts on the site they discount. Citation, having your own material quoted, is a separate prize, and GEO's finding is that clear, structured, quotable writing wins it: plain claims, real data, language a machine can lift whole.

Keep the human lane funded, because the research is blunt about where machines stop. AI assembles the consideration set; the buyer's dozen stakeholders and trusted voices still pick the winner. Machine visibility is the ticket to the room, and everything in Entries 06 through 14 still decides what happens inside it.

What backfires: sludge. Flooding the zone with AI-generated content to impress AI readers is the one move that fails with both audiences, machines weight authority and consistency over volume, and buyers who catch the slop discount everything else. The other failure is the comfortable one: deciding your buyers don't use AI. Ninety-four percent says otherwise, and the six percent are retiring.

The hard call: open an AI assistant right now and ask it about your firm the way a stranger with money would. Read every word. That's your first impression now, it's being delivered while you read this, and until today, nobody at your firm had heard the pitch.

Primary Sources

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- Research on AI Overviews, AI search visibility, source selection, and brand representation (including Semrush's AI Overviews study and related analyses of AI summaries and click behavior).