The Rise of AI Search and LLM Applications

Implications for Consumer Behaviour and Business Visibility

Report by Steve Coulter, State of the Art Digital. June 2026

Executive summary

This report synthesises the latest available research on the rapid growth of AI search and large language model (LLM) applications, and the implications for how businesses gain visibility and citations within synthesised results. AI outputs are becoming the first touchpoint in many consumer journeys, often resolving queries before a user visits any website.

Across multiple independent studies, three themes consistently emerge. First, AI assistants and LLMs have already reached mainstream usage for information seeking and shopping related tasks. Second, they are reshaping decision journeys by compressing research and comparison into conversational interactions. Third, AI systems are acting as discovery engines and gatekeepers, elevating certain brands while excluding others from consideration.

For businesses, this shift requires a deliberate response. Content must be designed for AI as well as humans, digital reputation needs to be strengthened across the wider web, and measurement practices must adapt to an environment in which many decisions are influenced before a click ever occurs.

Section summary

- AI search and LLM tools are now central to information seeking and brand discovery.
- Many queries are resolved inside AI interfaces without a visit to a website.
- Visibility, trust and performance now depend on how AI systems interpret and present information about brands.

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1. The shift to AI mediated discovery

Recent research shows that AI assistants and LLMs have moved from the margins to the centre of how consumers search for information, research products and discover brands. AI generated answers are increasingly the entry point into a topic and often the main lens through which consumers see available options.

In many cases, users now type natural language questions into AI tools rather than search engines, or rely on AI summaries integrated into traditional search results pages. The AI system interprets intent, aggregates information from multiple sources and presents a synthesis that may include recommendations, ranked options or next steps. The user may then either accept the guidance or undertake limited further verification.

This creates a new pattern in which AI acts as a discovery and filtering layer before consumers visit any owned digital property. The practical effect is that AI tools control the first impression of a category and of the brands within it. As a result, the accuracy, completeness and framing of AI answers now have direct commercial consequences.

Section summary

- AI outputs have become a primary gateway to information and product discovery.
- AI systems aggregate and interpret material that users previously collected across multiple sites.
- AI now functions as a discovery and filtering layer that shapes first impressions of brands.

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2. Scale of consumer adoption of AI search and LLM apps

2.1 Behaviour on traditional search engines

On traditional search engines, a large majority of users now interact with AI written summaries as part of their search behaviour. In research published in 2025, around four in five search users reported relying on AI summaries for at least two out of every five searches. This represents a significant behavioural change in a short period of time.

The same work suggests that AI summaries have contributed to a marked rise in so called zero click searches, in which users find what they need from the search results page and do not click through to a website. Estimates indicate that organic web traffic to some publisher categories has fallen by double digit percentages as a result.

In addition, a substantial share of LLM users report using these systems for synthesising information, creating overviews and asking for recommendations. Many now view AI as a faster way to understand a topic than visiting multiple websites and reading each in turn.

2.2 AI assistants as a parallel search ecosystem

A 2026 analysis of usage data indicates that AI tools now generate tens of billions of sessions per month worldwide. When compared to traditional search engine activity, AI assistant usage already represents more than half of search engine volume in raw session terms and a significant minority of global information seeking prompts.

The same analysis highlights the importance of mobile usage. The great majority of AI assistant interactions now take place in mobile applications, particularly through a small number of dominant tools. This widespread mobile usage makes AI assistants a persistent companion across contexts such as commuting, shopping, work and home life.

AI assistants are therefore no longer experimental or niche for most users. They operate as a parallel search ecosystem that runs alongside traditional search engines and increasingly integrates into everyday tools and workflows.

2.3 Sector specific adoption in commerce

Research in 2026 focusing on shoppers in the United Kingdom and the United States finds that around seven in ten consumers have used AI tools for shopping related tasks in the previous three months. These tasks range from product research and price comparison to asking for recommendations in specific categories.

Within this group, more than a third say they routinely use AI to discover new brands or products. A similar share report that AI tools help them compare more options than they otherwise would. At the same time, only a small minority have completed a purchase directly inside an AI interface, suggesting that AI has its greatest impact at the research and consideration stages of the funnel rather than at the point of transaction.

Separate work focused on groceries reveals similar patterns. Over a third of surveyed consumers report using AI tools or LLMs to help buy groceries within the preceding six months. Among those users, the majority rely on AI to compare prices and options, almost half use AI to research product information and a smaller but meaningful minority have used AI to complete a grocery purchase. This demonstrates that AI mediated decision making is expanding into high frequency, everyday categories and not only infrequent big ticket purchases.

Section summary

- A large majority of search users now rely on AI summaries for a significant share of their searches.
- AI assistants account for tens of billions of sessions per month globally and represent a substantial share of search like activity.
- Around seven in ten surveyed shoppers use AI tools for shopping tasks, and AI influence is spreading into everyday categories such as groceries.

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3. How AI systems are reshaping online consumer behaviour

3.1 Shortened and re shaped decision journeys

Across the research landscape, a consistent finding is that AI mediated journeys compress the traditional decision funnel. Historically, consumers would move through distinct stages of awareness, information gathering, comparison and purchase, often across multiple sessions and websites. AI tools now combine these stages within a handful of conversational exchanges.

For example, a consumer considering a financial product might previously have searched for introductory guides, read comparison articles and then visited individual provider sites. Today the same consumer can ask an AI tool to explain product types, list pros and cons, outline rough pricing and suggest a shortlist of providers in a few interactions. The AI effectively orchestrates and summarises information that the consumer might otherwise have collected manually.

This compression does not remove the need for further verification, but it does change where time and attention are spent. The AI becomes a central advisor early in the journey, framing the options and often presenting an ordered set of choices.

3.2 AI as discovery engine and gatekeeper

Recent commerce focused research describes AI systems as a new form of discovery engine and gatekeeper. Many shoppers now use AI specifically to ask for options, alternatives and recommendations rather than for factual information alone. In this context, the AI system decides which brands to surface in a shortlist and how to describe them.

A significant share of shoppers in recent surveys report having purchased from a brand they had not previously encountered because an AI tool recommended it. In other words, AI is actively expanding consumers' choice sets beyond the brands they already know. At the same time, brands that are not recognised or trusted by the AI system may never appear in a consumer's list of options.

Consumers rarely accept AI recommendations entirely at face value, but they do use AI outputs as a frame for subsequent validation. Most verify suggestions through search engines, online reviews or their existing knowledge rather than by going directly to brand websites. As a result, wider digital reputation and third party coverage remain critical in turning AI suggestions into conversions.

3.3 Trust, errors and their impact on brands

The research also highlights a clear relationship between the accuracy of AI recommendations and consumer trust in brands. When AI tools provide incorrect information about a product or service, a majority of shoppers report a reduction in trust

towards the brand concerned. A non-trivial minority state that they would avoid buying altogether if the AI makes a serious error.

Price is especially sensitive. Shoppers identify accurate pricing as the single most important element that AI must get right, ahead of reviews or stock availability. Many also cite product details such as availability and specifications as areas where current AI systems most need to improve.

Trust in AI recommendations is not evenly distributed across demographics. Younger shoppers and higher income households are both more likely to use AI tools and more inclined to act on AI recommendations without extensive verification. This magnifies the upside for brands that are accurately and positively represented and the downside for those misrepresented.

Section summary

- AI mediated journeys compress traditional funnels, combining research and comparison within conversational interactions.
- AI tools act as discovery engines and gatekeepers that determine which brands enter the consideration set.
- Errors in AI recommendations, particularly around price and product details, materially damage brand trust, with younger and higher income groups most affected.

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4. How AI systems select sources and cite businesses

While the internal workings of proprietary AI models are not fully transparent, research and practitioner analysis point to a consistent set of factors that influence whether and how a business is cited in AI answers.

4.1 Crawlability, structure and concise answers

AI systems depend on being able to parse content into discrete units that answer particular questions. Content that is clearly structured with meaningful headings, short paragraphs and explicit answers to common questions is more likely to be extracted and quoted.

Pages that begin with a concise summary of the main answer, followed by more detailed explanation, tend to be incorporated into AI responses more readily than long, unstructured text. Frequently asked questions, short definition boxes and clearly highlighted key facts function as convenient building blocks for AI generated answers.

In practice, this means that businesses benefit from designing content so that each page addresses a specific user intent, offers a direct answer near the top and then provides supporting detail. This helps both human readers and AI systems.

4.2 Authority, expertise and corroboration

AI systems appear to weight authority and expertise signals, much as traditional search engines do. Sites that cover a topic comprehensively, provide clear evidence of expertise and maintain up to date information are more likely to be favoured.

An important additional factor is corroboration. Because language models are trained on very large bodies of text, they are sensitive to patterns of agreement across sources. When multiple reputable sites say similar things about a brand, product or topic, AI systems have greater confidence in drawing on those statements.

Digital public relations activity contributes to this by securing mentions on authoritative, sector relevant sites. Brands that appear consistently in credible publications and industry resources are more apt to be included in AI generated shortlists, especially for queries about the best or most trusted options in a category.

4.3 Brand, review and product data signals

In commercial contexts, AI systems rely heavily on structured product and service data, as well as on review and rating signals, to shape recommendations. The completeness, accuracy and freshness of product data feeds, including pricing and availability, influence how reliable a brand appears.

Strong review profiles on major platforms give AI systems evidence of customer satisfaction and help validate claims made in brand content. Similarly, consistent naming, address and

contact details across directories and platforms make it easier for AI systems to treat all references as belonging to the same entity rather than to separate businesses.

Taken together, these signals affect whether a brand is selected at all, how it is described and whether it appears prominently in comparison style answers.

Section summary

- AI systems favour content that is structurally clear and offers concise, self-contained answers to specific questions.
- Authority and expertise signals, supported by corroboration across reputable sources, increase the likelihood of being cited.
- Accurate structured product data, strong reviews and consistent brand information are critical signals in AI driven commercial recommendations.

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5. Strategic implications for businesses

The research points to several strategic priorities for organisations that wish to be visible, accurately represented and frequently cited within AI search and LLM outputs.

5.1 Design content for AI as well as humans

Businesses should deliberately structure their content to support both human readers and AI systems. This includes:

- Writing pages around clearly defined user intents and questions.
- Providing short, direct answers near the top of each page, followed by deeper explanation.
- Using headings, bullet lists and FAQ sections to make content easy to scan and segment.
- Applying appropriate schema markup for articles, FAQs, products, services and locations to improve machine readability.

By doing so, organisations make it easier for AI tools to extract reliable snippets while also improving user experience.

5.2 Build topical authority and digital reputation

Rather than relying on isolated pages, businesses should develop clusters of content around their core topics. Pillar pages, detailed guides, case studies and how to materials can be interlinked to demonstrate comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

Alongside this, digital public relations remains essential. Securing coverage, expert commentary and thought leadership placements in relevant media reinforces a brand's perceived authority. When multiple authoritative sources reference a brand in connection with a topic, AI systems are more likely to recognise and recommend that brand.

5.3 Invest in product data quality and review management

For retailers and product manufacturers, the quality of product data is now a key determinant of AI visibility. Organisations should:

- Ensure that pricing, availability and key attributes are accurate and kept up to date across websites, marketplaces and feeds.
- Standardise names, categories and identifiers so that products are easy to recognise and compare.
- Monitor and improve review profiles, responding constructively to negative feedback and encouraging satisfied customers to leave reviews.

These steps reduce the risk of AI tools misrepresenting offerings, support accurate recommendations and increase consumer confidence when AI suggestions lead them to a brand.

5.4 Rethink measurement and attribution

Traditional organic metrics such as rankings and click through rates no longer capture the full impact of AI mediated discovery. Businesses should supplement these with indicators that reflect presence and influence within AI environments, for example:

- Periodically testing key queries in major AI assistants and logging whether and how the brand appears.
- Tracking changes in branded search volume and direct traffic that may result from AI exposure.
- Asking customers in surveys and post purchase questionnaires whether they used AI tools and, if so, which ones.
- Collecting qualitative feedback about how AI influenced their decision.

Over time, such practices can inform more realistic attribution models that recognise AI as an upstream driver of consideration and demand.

Section summary

- Organisations need to structure content so that AI systems can easily identify and extract accurate answers.
- Building topical authority and digital reputation across multiple channels increases the likelihood of being recommended.
- High quality product data, strong reviews and updated measurement approaches are essential in an AI mediated discovery landscape.

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6. Conclusion

AI search and LLM applications have rapidly become a mainstream part of how consumers seek information and make purchasing decisions. They compress traditional decision journeys, act as powerful discovery engines and exert growing influence over which brands enter a user's consideration set.

For businesses, the implications are clear. Visibility and trust will increasingly depend not only on traditional search performance but also on how AI systems perceive, interpret and present information about brands. Organisations that design content for AI consumption, invest in data quality and digital reputation, and update their measurement practices will be better placed to thrive in this new environment.

Those that do not adapt risk being underrepresented or misrepresented in the very channels that are shaping the future of online discovery and decision making.

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