Search Forward:

How AI is reshaping the B2B buyer journey

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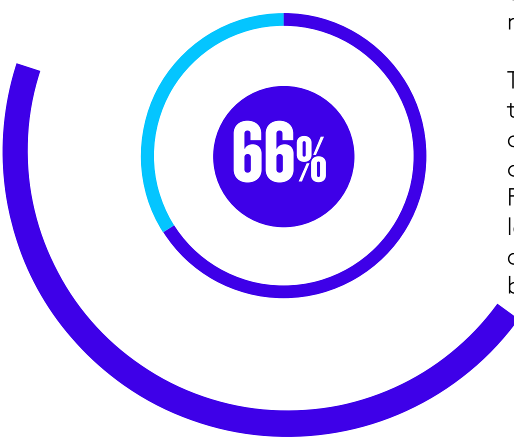
“66% of UK decision-makers already use AI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot and Perplexity to support vendor or supplier research.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AI has become a mainstream influence in B2B buying. Two-thirds (66%) of UK decision-makers already use AI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot and Perplexity to research and evaluate suppliers. Trust in these tools is remarkably high: 90% of users say they trust AI-generated recommendations, and 85% have discovered a new product or vendor through them.



Nearly half (45%) now use AI as one of their primary research channels, placing it ahead of LinkedIn (41%) and industry publications (34%). AI-driven discovery is changing what visibility means. When evaluating suppliers, 13% of respondents rated AI tools as the most trustworthy channel – equal to Google and other search engines.

Buyers mainly use AI to validate information (66%) and summarise reviews or feedback (65%), showing that these tools are now central to due diligence. After discovering a new supplier through AI, 79% of respondents visited the supplier's website, 67% looked for reviews and 59% made an enquiry or purchase.

A clear generational divide is emerging: 85% of 25–34-year-olds use AI for supplier research, compared with 33% of 45–54-year-olds and 23% of 55–64-year-olds. Despite AI's growing role, traditional trust factors remain decisive. 71% of decision-makers would disqualify a supplier that lacks clear, transparent information, and 69% would avoid one with negative reviews or reputation issues.

The picture that emerges is one of transition. AI is reshaping how buyers find and evaluate suppliers, but credibility, clarity and human trust still define success. For marketers, the challenge is to adapt – learning how to stay visible and authentic, as AI becomes an active part of the B2B buying journey.

THE NEW ERA OF B2B DISCOVERY

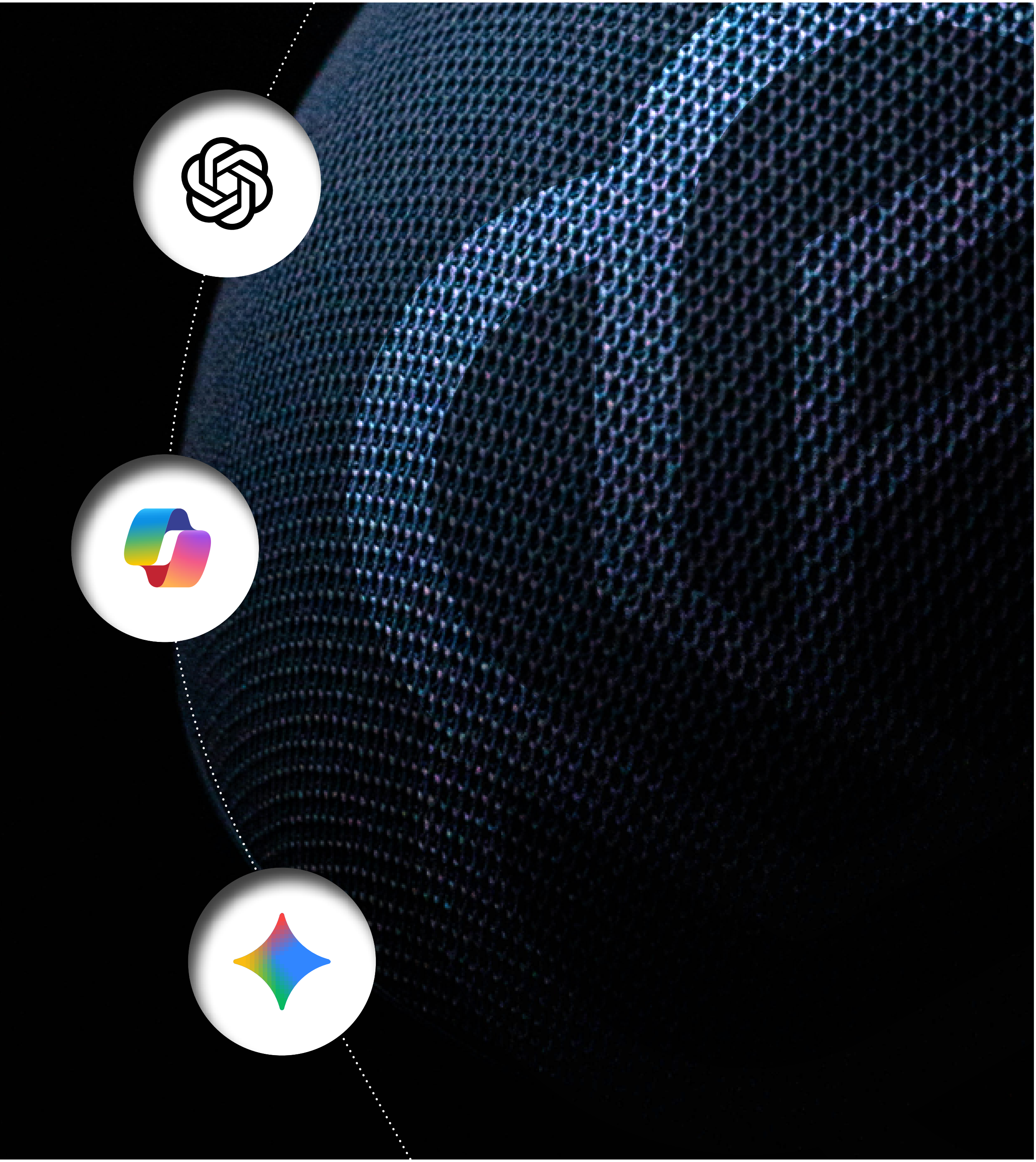
We are living in the age of AI. In just a few years, large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot have moved from research experiments into the daily routines of millions of people. As of October 2025, ChatGPT, the most popular LLM, claimed to have approximately 800 million active weekly users, putting it on par with some of the world's biggest websites and apps.[1]

Across sectors, generative AI now underpins everyday work. Lawyers use it to summarise case law. Analysts depend on it to process data and model financial outcomes. Designers experiment with generative tools to test creative ideas and materials before production. Executives lean on it to prepare speeches, write policy briefs and interpret complex reports.

Beyond the workplace, people are using AI to organise their personal lives, planning holidays, writing wedding speeches, creating recipes or managing household budgets.

Likewise, AI is rewriting the rules of B2B marketing. Until recently, visibility was built on predictable SEO pillars, such as keywords, backlinks and search rankings. Now, as buyers turn to generative AI to research and compare suppliers, the

1. https://techcrunch.com/2025/10/06/sam-altman-says-chatgpt-has-hit-800m-weekly-active-users/



Being cited or summarised within an AI response is fast becoming as valuable as ranking on page one of Google.

focus is moving from traditional search to answers. Being cited or summarised within an AI response is fast becoming as valuable as ranking on page one of Google. Whether this marks the next phase of search or a fundamental transformation is still unclear, but the implications for marketers are significant.

The same technology driving efficiency and innovation is also testing the boundaries of trust and authenticity. A flood of low-quality automated content – what the Financial Times and others now call "AI slop" – has begun to spread across social platforms, undermining trust and reducing visibility for authentic voices.[2]

At the same time, the risk of AI hallucination remains unresolved. IBM defines hallucinations as "outputs not justified by the training data",[3] while MIT Sloan describes them as one of the most persistent barriers to reliability in generative AI.[4] In both cases, the danger is the same: when content is produced without human oversight, accuracy and credibility suffer.

The consequences are already visible in professional settings. In Australia, Deloitte was paid £216,000 to produce a government report that was later found to contain factual errors, fabricated academic citations and a misquoted court judgment.[5] The firm admitted using generative AI in the process and agreed to refund part of its fee. The incident highlighted the governance gap opening up as AI accelerates content production, raising questions about accountability and ethical oversight.

These pressures are converging in marketing. Generative AI is reshaping discovery itself, changing how potential customers research, compare and evaluate suppliers. Traditional SEO remains essential, but its dominance is no longer guaranteed. Marketers now need to consider not only how their content ranks, but how it is interpreted, summarised and cited by AI systems.

The energy demand of AI is also becoming a real challenge for organisations that take ESG seriously. Each AI query consumes significantly more power than a traditional search, raising questions about how to balance technological progress with sustainability commitments. If generative tools are used for trivial tasks, they risk wasting substantial resources. Responsible use will mean designing systems – and behaviours – that minimise environmental impact without limiting innovation.

This report explores these tensions. Drawing on a survey of UK marketing professionals and insights from industry thought leaders, it examines how AI is transforming discovery, reshaping visibility and redefining the relationship between buyers, brands and search.

2. https://www.ft.com/content/88245052-1e68-41e1-9678-fcbbc5889e93
3. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/ai-hallucinations
4. https://mitsloanedtech.mit.edu/ai/basics/addressing-ai-hallucinations-and-bias/
5. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/oct/06/deloitte-to-pay-money-back-to-albanese-government-after-using-ai-in-440000-report

BUYER BEHAVIOUR IN TRANSITION

Business buyers have more autonomy and information than ever. Our research found that 65% use Google to research suppliers, 55% turn to customer review sites, 52% visit vendor websites and 47% use online marketplaces.

AI has entered that mix decisively. 45% of decision-makers use AI tools as a core research channel, ahead of LinkedIn (41%) and industry publications (34%).

As Andrew Bruce Smith, founder of AI-driven communications consultancy Escherman, notes: "AI overviews are accelerating the rise of zero-click search. Even when sources are cited, the traffic they drive is minimal and doesn't make up for the lost organic clicks."

For marketers, visibility no longer guarantees engagement. AI speeds up discovery but fragments attention, making it vital for brands to project credibility at every touchpoint.

Andrew Bruce Smith, founder of Escherman

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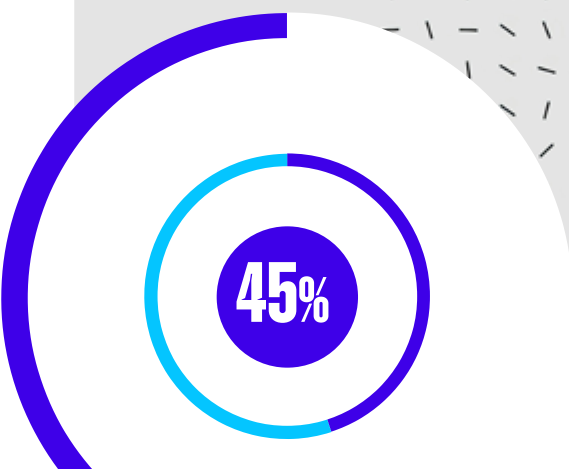


TRUST, TRANSPARENCY AND THE AI SHORTCUT

AI might surface suppliers faster, but buyers still verify before they trust.

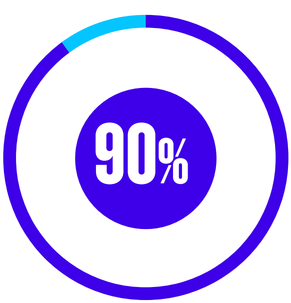
90% of AI users find its recommendations credible. 85% have discovered a new vendor through AI. 79% then visit that supplier's website, 67% check reviews and 59% make an enquiry or purchase.

Yet 71% of all business decision-makers would dismiss a supplier that lacks clear, transparent information, and 69% would do so because of poor reviews.

Mary Kemp, founder of AI Potential, explains: "GenAI isn't here to help you crank out more content. It's here to help you think better, work smarter and put humans back at the centre of your marketing. It's all still about human-to-human connection."
AI may introduce brands, but human clarity and trust still close the sale.

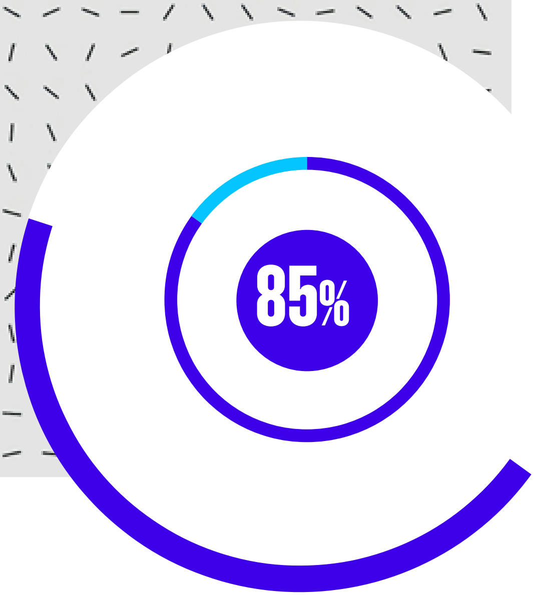
“90% of users who rely on AI for supplier research find its recommendations trustworthy.”

Mary Kemp, founder of AI Potential



“85% of purchasing decision-makers using AI tools have discovered a new product, vendor or supplier through an AI-generated response.”

Tom Swimbourne, digital marketing manager, Reconomy



HOW AI IS RESHAPING DISCOVERY

AI now sits at the heart of how businesses identify and assess potential partners. Buyers use it to validate information (66%), summarise reviews (65%), generate supplier lists (62%) and compare features and pricing (56%).

Tom Swinbourne, digital marketing manager at international circular economy specialist Reconomy, says: "Discoverability is no longer just about traditional search rankings. Tools like ChatGPT and Gemini are shifting the landscape toward AI-synthesised, context-rich answers."

For marketers, this means structuring content so that it's is both credible and machine-readable: clear formatting, contextual authority and strong external references all help brands surface in AI responses.

Andrew Bruce Smith points out that "media coverage is the most frequently cited content type in AI-generated summaries, reinforcing its value in digital visibility". PR and authoritative content now underpin how AI interprets credibility.

Swinbourne adds: "The risk is that traffic will decline as LLMs deliver summarised answers without clicks. But the opportunity lies in positioning. If your brand is cited as a reliable source, that visibility builds trust and recall."

User-generated content (UGC) has long been prized for authenticity and visibility. Platforms such as Reddit and Quora have been valuable training sources for AI systems, and early analysis suggested that Reddit content appeared prominently in AI-generated responses.[6]

Recent developments, however, reveal a more complex picture. As AI-powered search tools summarise Reddit discussions, fewer users click through to original threads, echoing the "zero-click" challenge facing publishers. Meanwhile, Reddit has begun limiting data access after years of large-scale scraping by AI developers, and researchers have noted a rise in machine-generated posts within some communities.[7]

The result presents a paradox: the same platforms that helped train AI are now struggling with how it changes their value. For marketers, this highlights the need to balance authenticity, credibility and control. The future of UGC will depend not just on what people say but also on how AI represents those voices.

6. https://www.searchenginejournal.com/why-reddit-is-driving-the-conversation-in-ai-search/556428/
7. https://www.eweek.com/news/reddit-blocks-internet-archive-ai-data-scraping/

A broader cultural debate, sometimes called the "dead internet theory", argues that much of what seems like genuine human activity online – social posts, comments, even news – is increasingly driven by bots and AI rather than real people. In this view, the internet feels "dead" not because it's empty, but because automated and inauthentic content has come to dominate. Whether or not that's overstated, the perception highlights a genuine challenge for marketers to stand out in an environment where automation is everywhere and authenticity is rare.

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GENERATIONAL SHIFTS AND BUYER DIVERSITY

AI adoption is uneven across generations. In our survey, 85% of 25–34-year-olds said they use AI tools for supplier research, compared with 33% of 45–54-year-olds and 23% of 55–64-year-olds.

Younger decision-makers are digital natives, comfortable with new tools and used to operating in fast-moving information environments. At the same time, they hold brands to higher standards. Research shows these younger cohorts place significant weight on ethics, transparency and the social impact of business.[8]

That expectation aligns closely with a wider challenge now facing marketers: as AI becomes embedded in discovery, maintaining trust and authenticity is becoming harder and more essential. As Oluwatobi Folasade Balogun, CEO of SustainWyse, puts it: "AI is a co-pilot, not an autopilot. It's changing how people find and trust brands, but it still needs human judgement to ensure quality, tone and ethics."

For marketers, the implication is clear: it's not enough to simply deploy AI tools and assume younger buyers will follow. You must combine digital fluency with clarity of purpose – otherwise you risk losing relevance even in the right channels.

8. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4716585

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IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

AI-driven discovery demands adaptability, integrity and joined-up thinking.

1 CONTENT AND SEO

Kevin Indig advises: "There is no safe play right now. Everything is in flux. The smartest thing companies can do is stay nimble." Marketers must evolve as AI reshapes visibility. Structured data, semantic depth and authoritative content are the new foundations.

2 PR AND EARNED MEDIA

Media visibility now drives algorithmic visibility. Bruce Smith notes that "getting featured in authoritative titles gives you a better chance of being cited – and showing up in AI summaries – than trying to force your own content to the top."

3 TRUST SIGNALS

Kemp stresses: “Search is no longer just Google. People are using LLMs to explore ideas, get recommendations and summarise options. The risk is invisibility. The opportunity is to be genuinely helpful.” Clarity and transparency will separate credible brands from generic ones.

4 GOVERNANCE AND ETHICS

Andrew Ames, head of PR and marketing at Tide Construction, warns: “There’s a real need for AI literacy. Businesses need to learn how to use these tools effectively and critically assess the information they provide.” Responsible use will underpin brand reputation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR MARKETERS:

Align PR, SEO and content teams around answerability – content that AI can interpret, cite and trust.

FOR LEADERSHIP:

Adopt AI literacy and ethical governance. Balance efficiency with authenticity, while investing sustainable practices.

FOR BUSINESSES:

Build credibility through trusted sources. Encourage third-party reviews and authoritative mentions that reinforce your visibility within AI ecosystems.

As Balogun explains: "Brands that invest in clarity, ethics and ecosystem visibility today will be the ones people find and trust tomorrow."

CONCLUSION

Increasingly, AI is a working partner in how information is created, found and trusted. For marketers, that shift changes everything from visibility to value. Success now depends on understanding how AI tools surface and summarise information as well as how human decision-makers interpret it.

As our research makes clear, AI is already woven into the buyer journey – driving discovery, shaping perception and influencing decisions. Yet trust, transparency and reputation remain non-negotiable. Marketers must learn to think like both strategists and editors, curating what AI sees, not just what people read. That means investing in credible, structured and attributable content; collaborating more closely with PR and communications teams; and embedding ethical and sustainable thinking into every aspect of digital strategy.

AI has blurred the boundary between discovery and decision. The challenge – and opportunity – lies in using it to build stronger, more transparent connections between brands and the people they serve.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Kevin Indig – Growth advisor for global companies, specialising in search, digital growth and the future of online discovery.

Andrew Bruce Smith – Founder and MD at AI-driven communications consultancy Escherman and chair of the CIPR AI in PR Panel.

Mary Kemp – Founder of AI Potential, a generative-AI adoption company helping organisations use the technology productively.

Tom Swinbourne – Digital marketing manager at Reconomy, an international circular economy specialist.

Oluwatobi Folasade Balogun – CEO of SustainWyse, an AI-powered platform helping startups simplify carbon tracking and decarbonisation.

Andrew Ames – Head of PR and marketing at Tide Construction, which specialises in volumetric delivery.

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