

WRITING FOR ROBOTS (AND HUMANS) · A FIELD GUIDE FOR AEC MARKETING & BD LEADERS

Your firm is being described by machines you don't control.

Before a prospect or referral source ever reaches your website, an AI system has already interpreted your brand, your work, and your expertise, and decided whether to mention you at all. This is the short version of what that means, and what to do about it.

SEO isn't dead. But the way we approach it is.

53%

of all web traffic in 2025 was automated, the second straight year machines outnumbered people online.¹

Most of it is scrapers and bad bots, not buyers. But every machine that reads and summarizes your firm still leads to a human decision.

39%

of U.S. desktop Google searches showed an AI Overview in June 2026, up from 26% in July 2025.²

The answer increasingly sits on top of the results, before anyone sees a single link.

+8%

growth in U.S. desktop search volume, Q2 2026 vs. Q2 2024: 77 billion searches a quarter.²

Search isn't shrinking. It's changing, and so is what it takes to be found.

REIMAGINE · WHAT DISCOVERY IS NOW

What actually changed

Search stopped being a list of links and became an answer engine. Four shifts, briefly:

AI Overviews

Generative answers sit on top of Google's results and push the links down the page.

AI Mode

Search becomes a conversation: follow-up questions, not a single query.

LLMs as starting points

ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Perplexity are where many buyers now begin, and no single tool dominates. ChatGPT's share of AI-assistant prompts fell from 70% to 50% in 2026's first half.²

Zero-click

Around 58% of U.S. Google searches end without a click to any website.³ The answer is already on the screen.

None of this retires the fundamentals. Authority, expertise, and genuinely useful content are exactly what these systems reward. **The fundamentals matter more, not less.**

Your buyers have moved. Most firms haven't.

Buying decisions in the built environment run on reputation, referrals, and third-party validation, the precise signals AI systems synthesize. When an owner, a GC, or a referral source asks an AI who to consider, your firm is characterized by a summary you didn't write. Being described well, cited, or left out is now a marketing outcome.

And fewer clicks don't make your website matter less. They change what it has to do. The people who do arrive have been pre-screened by AI: fewer, better informed, more selective, and closer to deciding whether you're credible. **Your site has to earn confidence and support a decision, not just win a visit.**

The SMPS Foundation's own research puts numbers on it: buyers already research this way, and few firms feel ready to be found, cited, and trusted there.

From the SMPS Foundation's 2027 Emerging Trends research ⁴

2x

B2B buyers using gen AI or conversational search doubled in a year, now outpacing websites, SMEs, and business developers as a source.

~75%

of B2B buyers are highly excited to use AI when they buy.

56%

of AEC marketing and BD leaders rate expertise-led visibility as highly impactful.

19%

say their firm is highly ready for it. 38% are minimally ready or not ready at all.

"Buyers are more sophisticated and informed. They are doing more research about us, especially with AI."

SMPS Foundation research participant

61%

USED AS
A SOURCE

21%

VISIBLY
CREDITED

The citation gap: being used isn't the same as being credited.

In AI answers about lodging, Tripadvisor showed up as a source in 61% of responses but as a visible, cited link in only 21%. ⁵ It's a travel example, but the mechanism is the same for AEC: your project write-ups and expertise can shape an answer about who to hire without your firm's name on it.

Close the gap two ways: be distinct enough that you can't be paraphrased without attribution, and earn mentions on the third-party sources AI already trusts.

What to do about it

1

Start from a point of view.

Without a clear Brand Truth and a real perspective, there's nothing worth writing, for humans or machines. Differentiation is the raw material; optimization is how it gets found.

2

Structure it so both can read it.

The same moves help a human skimmer and a model extracting your answer:

- Front-load the answer in the first line.
- Write headings as complete thoughts.
- Use schema markup and real tables.
- Answer the questions buyers actually ask.

3

Create what AI can't.

These are what a model can reference but never fabricate, and your durable edge:

- Original research and proprietary data
- Named frameworks and methods
- Earned, defensible positions
- First-hand project proof

Structure is the finish, not the substance. **You can't checklist your way to results:** these moves make a real point of view legible; they don't manufacture one. Your peers are hearing the same thing: SMPS's Q3 2026 AI Quarterly Insight lists generative engine optimization, structured content for AI retrieval, and expert author profiles among this quarter's AEC SEO trends.⁶

Measure what the business feels

STOP LEADING WITH

Clicks

Impressions

Keyword rankings

START LEADING WITH

Qualified leads

Opportunities worth your BD team's time, not raw form fills.

Revenue attribution

Pipeline and closed work traced back to search and content.

Search visibility

How often and how prominently you appear, clicks or not.

Brand mentions

Where you're named and cited across the web and AI answers.

The SMPS Foundation found 47% of AEC marketing and BD leaders call proving ROI highly impactful, but only 16% say their firm is highly ready to do it.⁴

Start Monday

1

Run one AI query on your own firm, in two or three tools.

Ask which firms to consider for your kind of work in your market. Note how you're described, what's cited, and whether you show up.

2

Write your one-sentence Brand Truth.

The distinct point of view only your firm can credibly claim. Use the Brand Truth worksheet from the session.

3

Audit one page against the checklist.

Take one thought-leadership or service page and run it through the Content Audit Checklist.

STEP 1 WORKSHEET

Your AI visibility snapshot

Ask each tool the question a prospect would ask, such as “Which firms should I consider for [your type of project] in [your market]?” Then note what comes back.

TOOL	NAMED?	HOW YOU'RE DESCRIBED	WHAT'S CITED
ChatGPT			
Google AI Mode / Gemini			
Perplexity or Claude			

STEP 2

Our Brand Truth, in one sentence

We believe

Corey Morris

President & CEO, VOLTAGE

Search Engine Journal VIP Contributor and author of *The Digital Marketing Success Plan*®. Presented with Jerry Gennaria of TOKY.
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NOTES

1. Thales / Imperva, 2026 Bad Bot Report (2025 traffic data).
2. Comscore, Q2 2026 AI Intelligence Report, reported by Search Engine Land, Sept. 22, 2026. U.S. desktop data: AI Overview share (June 2026 vs. July 2025), search volume (Q2 2026 vs. Q2 2024), and AI-assistant prompt share (Jan.-June 2026).
3. SparkToro, 2024 Zero-Click Search Study (U.S.).
4. SMPS Foundation + Stambaugh Ness, Emerging Trends in AEC Marketing and Business Development 2027. Buyer figures from Forrester and McKinsey's 2026 Global B2B Pulse, as cited in the report.
5. Comscore, same report: lodging-related AI responses, U.S. PC activity, Dec. 2025–May 2026.
6. SMPS, AI Quarterly Insight, Q3 2026.