



**The Earned Media Edge**

# Achieving Word of Mouth at Scale in 2026

Technology is revolutionizing the arena of brand marketing and communication, placing PR and GEO at the forefront of the AI discovery battle for brand visibility.

# The Business Case for Brand Authority

With all the predictions and thought leadership about how the state of brand marketing is changing in the age of AI, Stacker has filtered out what to really pay attention to, based on insights of our customers like Hims & Hers, WorkTango, J.P. Morgan, SoFi and more, and the thousands of media outlets they reach on our earned distribution platform.

Here, we break down our observations, key trends, and essential truths that arose in 2025. These underpin this report's predictions, takeaways, and checklists to help brands who want to stay ahead design their marketing strategy for 2026.

## #01

### Budgets Are Flat, But Expectations Aren't

Marketing budgets and headcounts are at risk with widespread economic instability, yet stakeholders are still pushing for aggressive growth. Marketing budgets are often first to be cut, and the ask to do more with less has infiltrated almost all marketing teams.

To fill these gaps, businesses are getting

creative. Whether that's responding to a leadership's directives to "do AI" or rethink their traditional marketing mix for this new era of search and discovery. Ultimately, the goal is to find what can deliver the ROI they're after, without adding to teams' bandwidth.

## #02

### Earned Media Has Become a Capital-Efficient Marketing Strategy

Earned media used to be a black box: hard to measure, slow to scale, and easy to deprioritize when budgets tightened. In 2025, earned media became one of the most capital-efficient paths to brand visibility and authority. Among the marketing strategies that may be scrapped in 2026, an

earned media strategy is the last one that should be considered. Data suggests that Earned Media shouldn't be left to discretionary budgets; rather prioritized as a force for multiplying omnichannel results.

We'll dig into this more later.

## #03

### Trust Still Matters

Despite consumers' increasing reliance on AI, the foundational principles that guide Large Language Model (LLM) results mirror what humans and media still prioritize: human-to-

human trust, readability, interest, and relevance.

This is why PR and SEO must join forces looking into 2026.

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# Methodology

Our approach was informed by interviews with industry leaders, analysis of recent trends and existing research, and examination of the critical questions facing marketers today. For real-world insights, we spoke to performance strategists, content leaders, and PR experts to understand both the challenges and the opportunities in this new landscape.

Contributing insights to this report include:



**Amanda Coffee**

Communications Leader, PRWeek 40 under 40 2024, *Bury the Lede* Substack



**Gab Ferree**

Founder, *Off the Record*



**Kevin Fowler**

Head of SEO, *Stacker*



**Steve Kearns**

Senior Director Customer Evangelism and Community Marketing, *Jasper AI*



**Rob Powell**

Director of News Product/Head of Local, *Stacker*

# 2025's Lessons We'll Take Into 2026

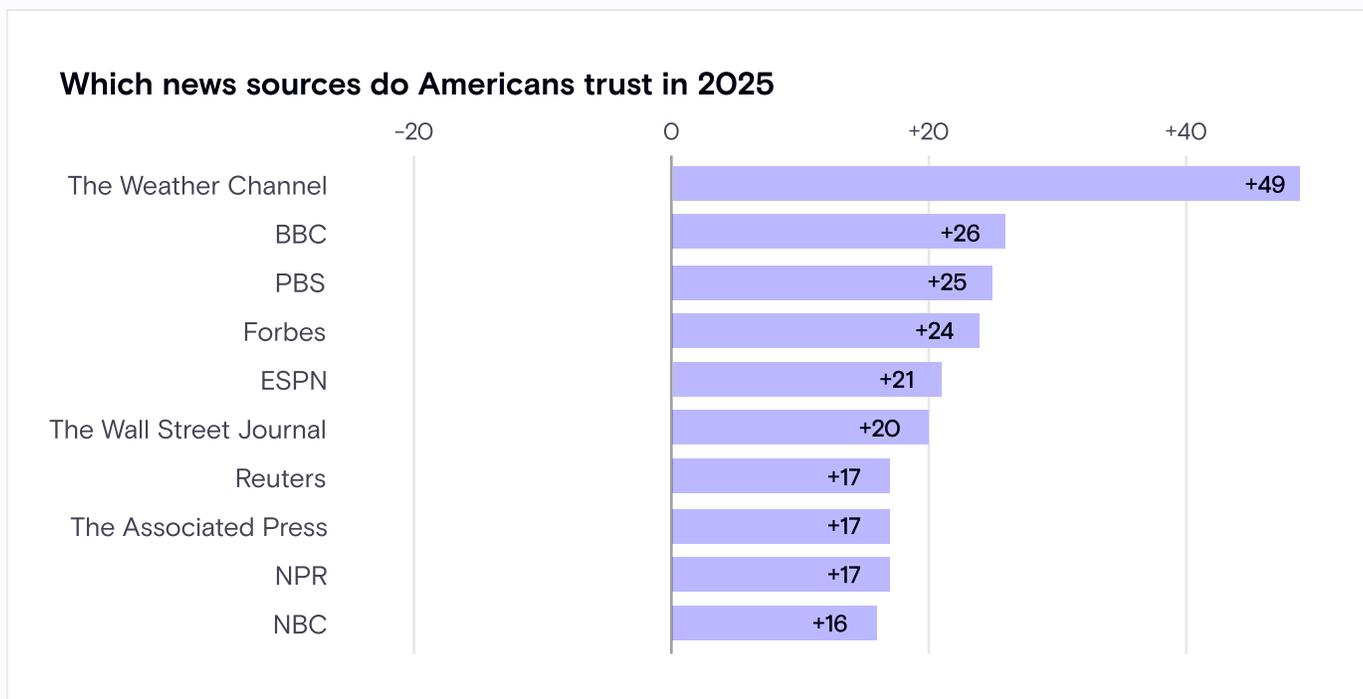
The landscape of brand marketing has been forever changed in 2025, further fragmenting consumer trust and suspicion of branded content.

## **What We Learned**

The advent of AI summaries brought on one of the first great challenges for brand teams in 2025, while also setting the tone for what we can anticipate and act upon in 2026.

## Trust is Further Fragmented As Media Outlets Multiply

Americans' overall trust in the media is on the decline; in fact, the top trustworthy news outlet is now The Weather Channel, according to [one poll](#), far outweighing the BBC in second place. This does little to help brand discovery. Despite this, Pew Research found in 2024 that [most U.S. adults think local news outlets are important](#), suggesting an often overlooked avenue for customer connection could be more strategic than previously thought.



Source: YouGov, 2025

This trust deficit is exacerbated by the radically transformed ways that news is delivered and consumed. Americans now get news from social media and podcasts, online news, news aggregators and newsletters, local TV news, or newspapers — in that order, [according to a 2025 poll by research firm SSRS](#). The upside is that these disparate platforms are reaching new audiences that traditional media has otherwise struggled to attract, according to research from [Nieman Lab](#). Yet with millions of creator journalists and independent media publishers across social, Substack, and podcasts reporting news to smaller audiences, echo chambers are multiplying. At the same time, under-resourced newsrooms struggle to uphold traditional

journalism standards, further fragmenting audience trust.

This fragmentation of how we get news has made it harder for brands to build authority through tried-and-true channels.

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## Brand Discovery Has Shifted Off-Site

Where consumers search for answers has also changed with the proliferation of AI. Despite what some might say, traditional SEO strategies aren't dead. However, they're also no longer enough to help brands rise to the top and above their competition.

In the age of AI, brand discoverability is crucial, where "zero-click" searches no longer just rank

content and there's less pay-to-play. LLMs have had reverberating impacts on web traffic by extracting fragments of top sources it deems trustworthy and turning them into cited AI answers, instead of directing users to the original sites. And it's rarely clear how or why one brand gets cited over another.

At least, until recently.

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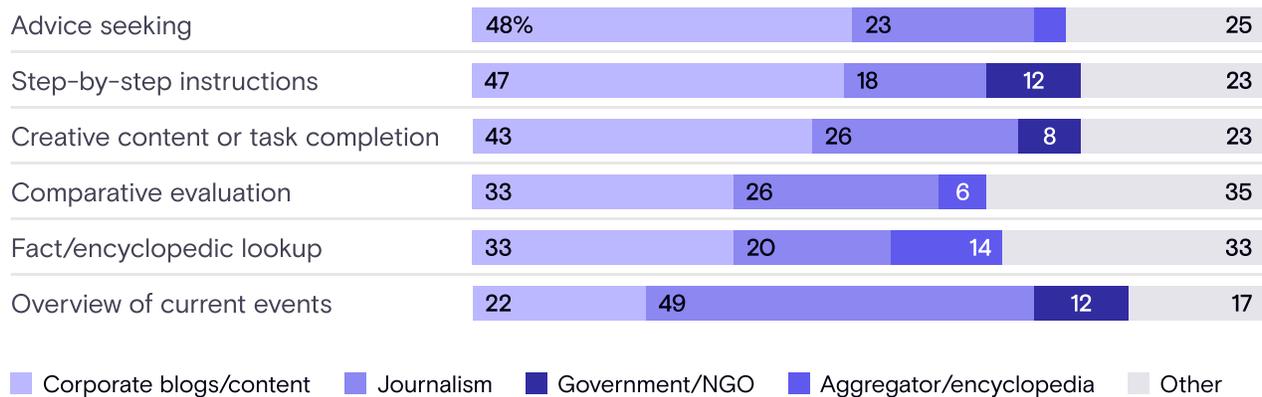
## AI Has Reshaped the Value of Earned Media

Earned media's value is hugely important to AI models. Here are the key lessons we've observed from the thousands of stories we've run in outlets across the US and Canada and the hundreds of brands we work across on earned media's weight in generative search to keep in mind for 2026 brand visibility plans:

- **LLMs prioritize value over traffic:** With AI-derived answers and summaries, LLM models now prioritize content absorption rather than sending traffic back to websites.
- **AI strongly prefers earned media > ads:** Consumers don't engage with ads, and LLMs don't either. Only 5% of LLM citations come from sponsored placements; instead, the majority come from earned, owned, and community forums. This suggests that while paid can still get you visibility, it's not having the same impact in scaling your authority.

## Types of media cited in AI responses, by query type

Analysis of more than a million links from AI responses in July 2025



Data: Muck Rack; Note: ChatGPT (40 and 40-mini), Gemini (Flash and Pro) and Claude (Sonnet and Haiku) models used; Chart: Kavya Beheraj/Axios

💡 AI visibility can't be sponsored like it was with paid search marketing. At least for now, generative engine optimization (GEO) can't be gamed, says Kevin Fowler, Head of SEO at Stacker. Instead, consistent, earned media that support long-term brand-building strategies are needed to build credibility and authority with LLMs, says Amanda Coffee, Founder of Coffee Communications.

Brand marketing is no longer just about visuals or tone of voice. It's now the vertical responsible for establishing and scaling brand authority.

- **LLMs are biased towards recency:** Research from Waseda University shows that systematically, LLMs weigh fresh content more heavily than older sources, making journalism a natural fit for primary citations in AI and more trusted than the traditional press release. Meaning brands need an “always-on” strategy.
- **GEO is holistic:** LLMs have a holistic approach, learning from thousands of factors and sources from company websites to online forums or traditional media to calculate which authorities to trust.

It cites earned media and non-owned media platforms like Reddit and Quora because of their authenticity and validation versus a branded blog piece that might use old SEO tricks

to become visible. So, social listening and your community engagement becomes all the more important.

That consumer approach, where people are talking to each other about the things that they find most valuable, is going to be a lot more authentic than scaled branded comms that so many of us in the industry grew up with.

**Steve Kearns**

Senior Director Customer Evangelism and Community Marketing at Jasper AI

- Different sources for different models:** Not all earned media is equally influential to LLMs, but that is likely to continue shifting as [LLM deals with publishers are made](#). Trade publications and local news media are influential on most platforms, especially in particular industries, like in healthcare. However, certain platforms favor certain sources. Claude currently relies heavily on government sources like the CDC, whereas ChatGPT prefers AP News, and Gemini lean towards Wikipedia, according to [Muck Rack's Generative Pulse report](#).

### Top website domains cited by AI models, by industry

Analysis of more than a million links from AI responses in July 2025

Category	Claude	ChatGPT	Gemini
Education	Coursera, SessionLab, Scrum Alliance	Wikipedia, TeamBonding, Eubrics	Wikipedia, Coursera, Udemy
Energy	ScienceDirect, Dept. of Energy, Wikipedia	Wikipedia, Reuters, AP News	Wikipedia, Dept. of Energy, ScienceDirect

<b>Finance/Insurance</b>	Bankrate, NerdWallet, Federal Reserve	Reuters, Wikipedia, Investopedia	Investopedia, Wikipedia, Reuters
<b>Government</b>	National Library of Medicine, Wikipedia, Science Direct	Wikipedia, AP News, Reuters	Wikipedia, AP News, National Library of Medicine
<b>Health care</b>	National Library of Medicine, NCBI, CDC	Wikipedia, National Library of Medicine, AP News	National Library of Medicine, Wikipedia, NIH
<b>Hospitality</b>	FDA, Toast, USDA	Wikipedia, AP News, Google	Wikipedia, CRR Hospitality, AP News
<b>Media/Entertainment</b>	Wikipedia, FCC, Nielsen	Wikipedia, TV Tech, RadioKing	Wikipedia, FCC, YouTube
<b>Retail/E-Commerce</b>	FDA, National Library of Medicine, Wikipedia	Wikipedia, AP News, Reuters	Wikipedia, Quora, Reuters
<b>Technology</b>	Udemy, Coursera, Medium	LinkedIn, MoldStud, arXiv	Coursera, Medium, Udemy
<b>Travel/Airline</b>	FAA, IATA, Wikipedia	Reuters, Wikipedia, FAA	FAA, Wikipedia, IATA

Sources- Data: Muck Rack; Chart: Axios Visuals

## Success in 2026

# Key Observations Across Strategy, Content, & Distribution

Here's how we would take the lessons of 2025 and apply them moving forward in 2026, to create an actionable plan for scaling brand authority and visibility.

## Strategy

Success in 2026 requires a fundamental pivot from seeking attention to building authority. At the most basic level, it requires higher-quality from your O&O content. Ensuring that everything you are producing can stand out amongst what many are calling, AI slop.

Every piece of owned content should be interesting enough to turn into earned media, because that would mean it's newsworthy and industry-relevant — both qualifiers that would actually make someone pay attention. This approach takes content beyond sales or marketing messaging into something that's actually helping to elevate the industry. And this content doesn't just have to be thought leadership; there are absolutely ways to talk about product optimization as news that should be interesting to people.

**Steve Kearns**

As media relations evolve into 'machine relations,' historically siloed disciplines must converge into a single engine to influence LLMs. By shifting your primary metric from Share of Voice to 'Share of Answer,' using press to generate the trusted signals that GEO demands, and treating earned media as a capital-efficient core investment rather than a discretionary add-on, brands can secure the positive sentiment and third-party validation necessary to win the battle for discovery.

It's a fraught battle, but there are things you can do to get ahead.

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## Integrate SEO & PR Efforts

Marketing once owned SEO. But as we have discovered, earned media is AI's insurance strategy to help it reliably summarize answers due to its built-in third-party validation. With GEO, PR professionals take a much more active role in driving brand strategies.

In other words, "media relations are becoming machine relations," said Gab Ferree, Founder of Off the Record, a communications industry community, in a webinar with Axios HQ.

It's on the comms professionals to learn the patterns and then take action on them.

Gab Ferree

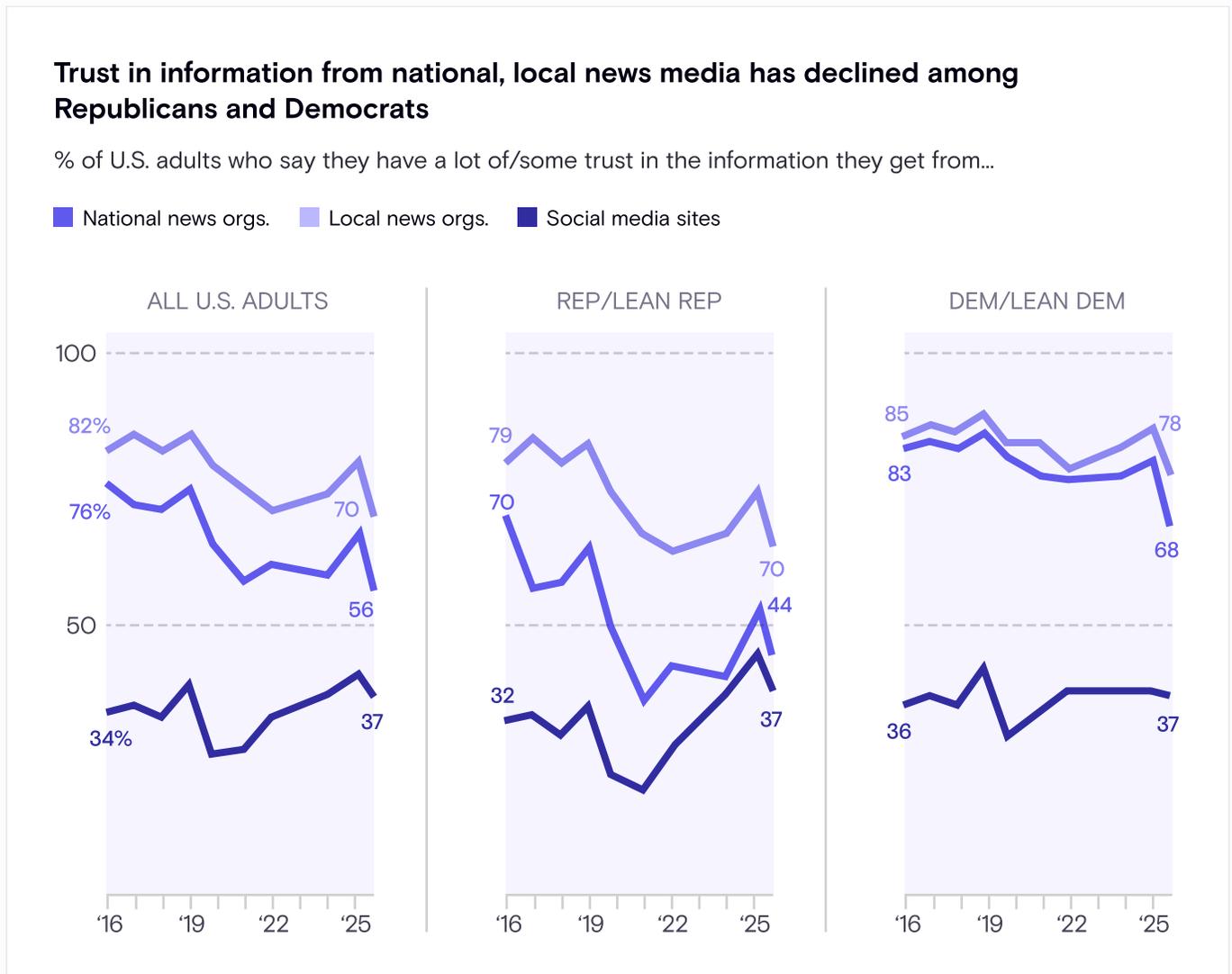
To win in both AI and human discovery in 2026, brands must treat earned authority as the shared core of SEO and PR, working in tandem, rather than as two separate programs. What historically worked for SEO, isn't irrelevant simply because GEO has entered the equation. However, it does require a reimagined strategy for the current era.

### TIP

Just like understanding beat reporters in traditional media, PR professionals should study AI's attribution patterns to identify niche journalists or publications particular LLMs seem to favor in their citations.

## Gain Trust with Local and Trade Press First

Instead of measuring success with coverage in legacy publications, new opportunities for gaining and compounding trust are possible with the increasingly important role of local and trade presses:



Source: Pew Research, 2025

- **Local Trust:** The majority of Americans, even across party lines, trust local news, according to a [2025 Pew Research Center survey](#). Even [national networks like NBCUniversal are strengthening ties with local affiliates to deliver more and higher-quality regional content](#)

- **Recency Bias:** Consistent earned coverage in trade and local outlets signals trust to LLMs. This helps compound earned media wins and scale authority at the same time
- **The Ladder Up:** Instead of relying on one large national headline win to lead brand discovery, securing local media coverage first can be surfaced by LLMs and increases the likelihood of pick-up in larger outlets.

 **TIP**

For a major Under Armour PR campaign, Amanda Coffee targeted local and trade media first, to gain the credibility needed to get the attention of top-tier trade publications.

[Stacker's Local program](#) works with brands like Instacart that have proprietary data on topics like shopping trends helping them scale media coverage. They can create automated localized stories using localized datasets and distribute them across the newswire to relevant media outlets.

Stacker learned that our local stories are read more than our national ones, and many local newspapers were actually more interested in local coverage from our newswire than our national stories. These findings presented a big opportunity for brands to use Stacker Local to reach new audiences directly on their doorstep with content that genuinely has real-world impact on them.

**Rob Powell**

Director of News Product/Head of Local, Stacker

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## Underscore That Earned Media is the Top Way to Get ROI

Historically, earned media demanded significant investment with limited visibility into impact, making it easy to classify as discretionary. If marketers want to protect marketing budgets in 2026, they will need to show that earned media strategies are not discretionary spending anymore. Instead, they have become the most capital-efficient path to brand visibility and authority.

Here's what that could look like:

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<b>Distribution</b>	Get a story placed in a legitimate outlet.
<b>Extension</b>	Do a podcast interview, thanks to incoming media requests from the original story.
<b>Engagement</b>	Host a Live ask-me-anything webinar around insights, new data, or takeaways.
<b>Amplification</b>	Clip the interview into multiple short-form posts with top insights, each linking to your site or a down-funnel CTA.
<b>Community</b>	Post takeaways on Reddit.

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Earned media strategies can also provide a clearer indication of ROI metrics than before due to AI citations and visibility, when media pickups can directly influence AI citations, [providing more quantifiable measurements that show impact](#), according to original research conducted in tandem with Scrunch.

Brands like TurboTenant are [leveraging an earned media strategy to scale their visibility](#) within and outside of LLMs, and companies like Range are staying ahead of the curve by scaling trust with their audiences and [getting cited in over 3,000 outlets](#).

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## Treat GEO as an Extension of a Successful SEO Strategy

Even more than the overall lessons we're learning about AI and how it can apply to earned media, there are indisputable new rules for the way brands approach authority.

Search now prioritizes credibility over keywords. These new rules of GEO mean that brand visibility is now much more than "link juice": the old way of measuring online brand authority through backlinks and rank.

The reality is we're not working in an attributable environment anymore, so don't get caught up in archaic understandings of page rank. If you've been considering a broader authority environment beyond backlinks, you've probably been optimizing for GEO for years without knowing it.

**Kevin Fowler**

Still, SEO isn't dead. The way brands enhanced top-of-funnel visibility are still effective, like earning high-quality backlinks. But now with GEO, brands need to provide more industry value and build trust by expanding their site authority by adding attributive language in owned content and generating positive brand mentions in earned media.

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## Share of Answer is the New Share of Voice

In 2026, brands will track Share of Answer like they once tracked media mentions. The branded queries that matter most in GEO now are comparative and transactional, like "*How ethical is Target versus Walmart?*".

I think what we really need to be looking at is a more holistic environment, especially around branded competitive queries. There's a majority of branded traffic in GEO — sentiment analysis, total authority, total number of citations, and presence in AI — I think will all combine into something larger, with citations being one important piece of that puzzle.

**Kevin Fowler**

Though, the sheer frequency of citations isn't enough. Brands need to be aware of not only how often they're showing up, but also the sentiment of their citations. 45% of PR professionals say they have seen AI create something that would put the brand at risk, [according to research by Axios HQ and Off the Record](#).

User-generated content about brands plus analysis across authoritative sites like G2 and TechCrunch helps LLMs answer those comparative and transactional queries, making strong positive sentiment matter more for narrower queries where accuracy really matters.

In other words, sentiment analysis is another way for AI to fact-check itself in real time.

PR should really be doing everything they can across all platforms to manage sentiment analysis, responding to social media posts, things like that. That stuff was more important for community building in the past. Now it's becoming much more impactful to the real-world search environment, to AI, SEO, et cetera.

Kevin Fowler

## Content

There is no 'Share of Answer' without a trusted source of truth. Before a brand can earn authority, it must pay off its 'communications debt' to become visible to LLMs. This section details how to pivot from marketing messaging to a 'newsroom' operating model, creating the high-quality, 'outside-in' journalism that fuels both reporter interest and AI citation.

By optimizing this content for machine readability through transcripts and FAQs, brands can transform their owned channels into something that algorithms prioritize.

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### Overcome the Owned “Communications Debt” Problem

There is no significant earned strategy without first establishing a strong owned content foundation. Without a strong online presence and content, brands can suffer from “communications debt” — or the lack of clear, quality owned content — and become less

relevant to LLMs. With significant communications debt, Comms and SEO teams have to work harder to ensure content that talks about their brand is accurate, instead of letting algorithms or outlets do it for them.

Amanda Coffee asserts that in this ultra-competitive market, if reporters don't see rich, credible content like original articles, or LinkedIn posts, they "move on," she said.

I think a lot of firms are realizing that in the age of AI, they're in communications debt — they don't have good, owned content about their brand. And when you type into ChatGPT or Perplexity, it's pulling sites that aren't your own.

Amanda Coffee told [Ragan Communications](#)

## Prioritize Content Quality Over Quantity

AI now [authors more articles online than humans](#), according to a study by [Graphite](#). But just because brands can use AI to pump out content doesn't mean they should.

What LLMs (and the journalists using them) prefer

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First-party data and original research

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First-person language to signal authenticity

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Conversational tone rather than corporate speak

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Content that adds genuine value versus regurgitated AI slop

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## The Newsroom Operating Model

Brands are increasingly blurring the distinctions between owned media and earned media by creating their own high-quality, non-promotional editorial content referred to as a brand newsroom.

From Freddie Mac to ŌURA, brands are developing their own in-house newsrooms, [hiring more than 2,200 ex-journalists since 2020](#) to create branded, owned content that follows similar editorial guidelines to traditional media. [And it's only getting more attention.](#)

This is a fundamental shift from traditional earned media strategies that centered around brand milestones or tentpole moments. Amanda explains that “the secret sauce is having an outside-in approach” — where stories cover broader industry narratives like [Shopify does in its new newsletter](#) or opportunistically add value to what's in the news.

### CASE STUDY

On LawnStarter's blog, the founders documented a month of biphasic sleep that was interesting and novel enough for The Guardian to pick it up, along with other publications and interviews.

These brands are providing business impact with excellent owned content for their own platforms while also providing traditional media with stories they can republish or use in their reporting. But in some ways, brand content itself is [replacing legacy niche media](#) by providing top-notch content based on original data.

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## Optimizing for the Machine

Right now, LLMs struggle with non-written formats on the web, like images and audio. To ensure your multimedia content builds your authority, there are several things you should do to optimize it for AI:

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<b>Audio</b>	Add written transcripts to help index your content in the backend, like written transcripts for podcasts.
<b>Video</b>	Include rich metadata and descriptions wherever possible
<b>FAQs</b>	Use consistent structures on your owned content to help LLMs pick up conversational queries that users are typing into ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, or their LLM of choice

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PR teams should prioritize media opportunities that can compound their impact over time, such as appearing on podcasts that also publish full episodes on YouTube, which can increase visibility across certain AI models. This circles back to the flywheel effect.

 **KEVIN'S TIP**

Provide multiple angles into your content to build brand authority. LLMs need to see your brand's content in a variety of ways to find, index, and understand it fully. It's about volume AND variety.



## Distribution

Creating high-quality content is only half the battle; the other half is ensuring that content actually permeates the ecosystems that AI models trust to answer their queries. Content parity with competitors is not enough when authority is the differentiator.

This section outlines how to transition from linear publishing to creating a flywheel that feeds itself and scales your authority with as little as a single piece of owned content. By combining digital scale with 'human signals' and community efforts, brands create a self-reinforcing loop of authority that algorithms cannot ignore.

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### How Scaling Earned Distribution Works

People want first-party data and insights that they can't find elsewhere. This means LLMs seek that out too.

The most in-demand marketers are system thinkers who can apply a scaled content lens to building content pipelines with AI in the loop, because we have tools that enable us to do that now.

**Steve Kearns**

Force-ranking content through distribution and backlink tactics don't work anymore. Now, platforms like Stacker lift brands' authority through a more holistic approach. We help brands with earned reach grow their signals of authority to the LLMs by distributing fresh content to publishers across the country on their behalf, which increases their brand mentions, links, and attributions.

**The math:** If you're a brand targeting keywords with one article, you have one opportunity to be cited. Distribute that content to 3,000 news outlets, and you now have 3,000 opportunities. The citation points to the news outlet, but the article includes a canonical link back to your website and with full attribution for creating the content. [The brands getting ahead are doing it](#). Earned needs scale, repetition, and credibility filtering. Stacker does all that.

Stacker's platform distributes your content at scale, supports brands, and distributes content consistently with customized recommendations for timely stories with [Sparks](#) – that works with LLM recency bias – and taken together, helps brands establish and raise brand authority.

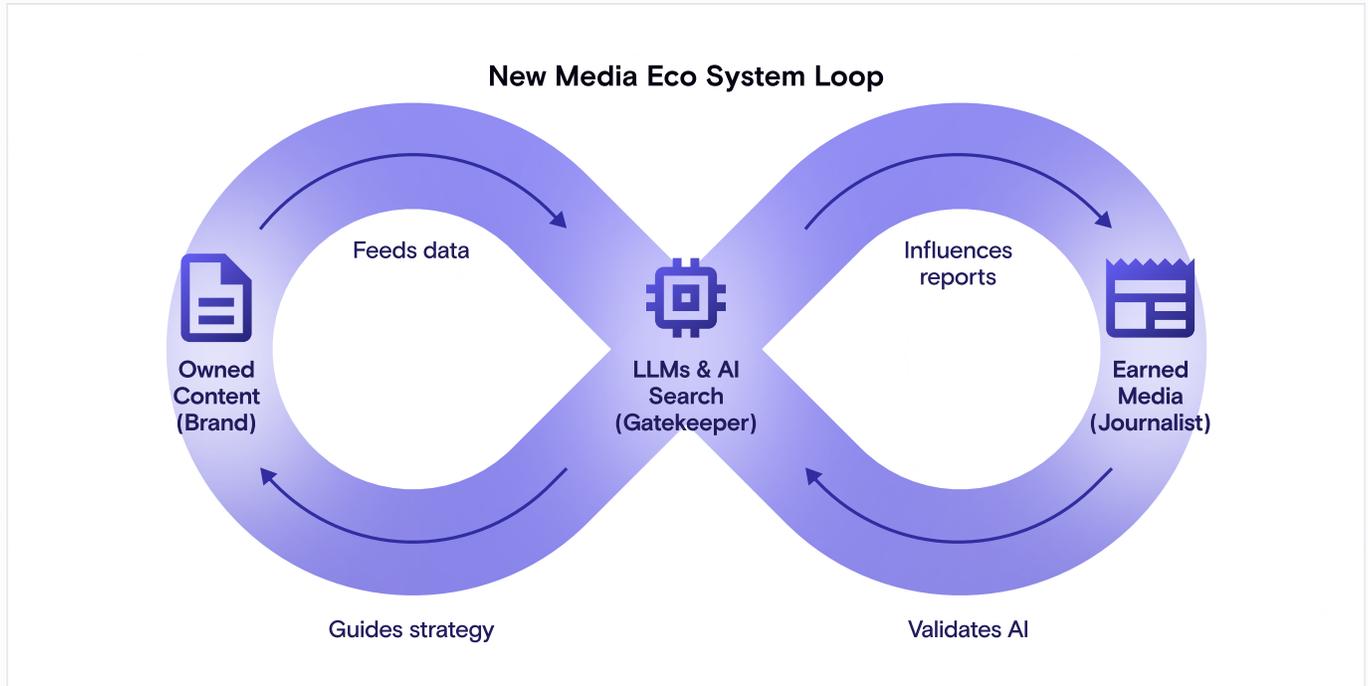
See just how far one piece of content could take you with [Stacker's Earned Reach Calculator](#).

 **TECHNICAL NOTE**

Bots care about which piece of content is the primary source, so they can cite it correctly and generate traffic back to it. Ensure your owned content pieces carry canonical tags so your content is attributed rather than syndicated duplicates – though bots are getting better at deciphering this.

## The New Media Ecosystem Loop

Done right, creating brand content that appeals to humans and LLMs creates a reinforced web of influence that has more utility than ever.

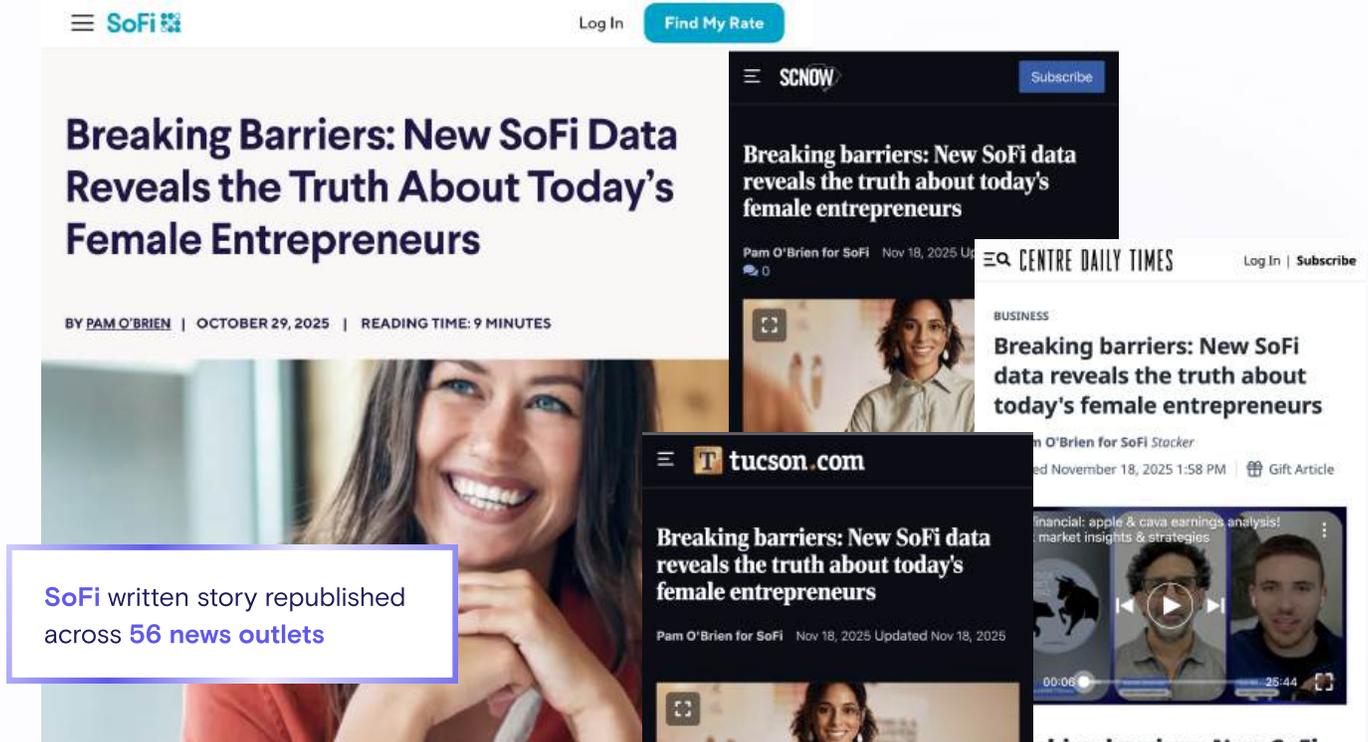


### Content distribution at scale multiplies ROI

If brands want sustained visibility in 2026, their narratives will need to live inside ecosystems people already trust, not just owned channels. Earned reach enables brands to write their own stories and syndicate them to media publishers that are hungry for content, providing ROI that aligns with multiple brand goals, around SEO, GEO, visibility, and authority.

## Real World Impact

Brands like SoFi, Paylocity, and WorkTango are already leveraging this loop to drive authority:



Following Stacker distribution of content about giving constructive feedback, WorkTango has gained features in Google's AI Overviews for related searches

Keyword	Intents	SF	Volume	KD	CPC	Traffic	Change	Paid	Position	Change
giving constructive feedback examples	1	3	1.6k	18	0.04	184	+135	0	9 → 1	+8
constructive feedback on performance review	1	4	1.6k	17	N/A	184	+90	0	6 → 1	+5
positive feedback example	1	4	400	4	0.13	16	+13	0	11 → 1	+10
simple feedback examples	1	4	400	12	0.97	0	-26	0	6 → 1	+5
good feedback examples	1	4	300	8	0.58	34	+16	0	6 → 1	+5
professional positive feedback examples	1	4	200	16	1.01	29	+10	0	5 → 1	+4
constructive feedback examples for colleague	1	4	200	30	2.00	7	+1	0	9 → 1	+8

### AI citations

AI Overview

 **251** +251

Pages 27 +27

ChatGPT

 **2** +2

Pages 17 +17

Perplexity

 **9** +9

Pages 16 +16

Gemini

 **3** +3

Pages 4 +4

Copilot

 **4** +4

Pages 4 +4

In a previous conversation with Michael Farr of Paylocity, he shared, “We used to think getting one or two high-profile mentions in a quarter was a big win... Now we’re seeing hundreds of mentions in places we’d never even considered before. It’s a whole new level of brand presence.”

## The Earned Distribution Dividend

With more ways to showcase great content, like service journalism that is actually helpful to readers and industries, brands are wise to invest in continuous, earned media. This creates the “Earned Distribution Dividend”.

This concept underscores how earned media provides high ROI and long-lasting visibility when applied with consistent distribution. With AI, the authority they gain over time compounds and brands are consistently rewarded, making it an investment that pays back in results.

## In-Person Moments as Digital Signal Generators

Though conventional wisdom says PR will become digital in this AI-age as content creation multiplies and hyperpersonalization becomes the norm across personas, geographies, and languages, there is a growing appetite for the complete opposite, even as these strategies become the basic requirements for brand visibility, says Steve Kearns.

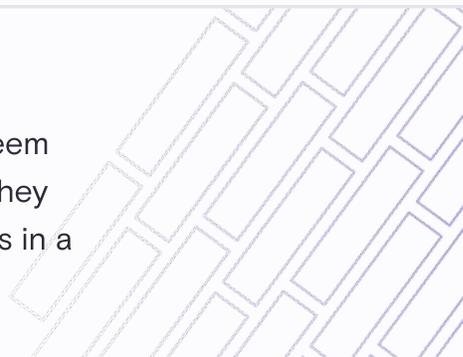
This LLM moment is placing more value on the “scale without context route,” where AI can help create endless amounts of content a day. This creates an opportunity for brands to differentiate through community building efforts, such as in-person events. While it may be unclear how IRL experiences benefit AI strategies, generating authentic peer-to-peer conversations that develop into organic mentions of brands on Reddit, Quora, and social ensures that the exact “human” sources that AI sources turn to for verification are being fed.

In-person community building and high-touch engagements that build relationships and help consumers learn from one another are far more impactful than 50 versions of a marketing email.

**Steve Kearns**

 **STEVE'S TIP**

Tracking who shares about your brand organically might seem like a vanity metric, but if they are nurtured by the brand, they can become brand advocates that amplify brand messages in a more authentic way than a brand could.



# Takeaways

Brand narratives will need to live inside ecosystems people already trust, not just in owned channels, for sustained visibility in 2026.

In 2026, for brands to reach authority — not just awareness — they will need to engineer credibility through earned media environments that people actually want to amplify, and they'll need to do so consistently across reputable outlets to appear in AI-mediated discovery.

To build durable trust in 2026, brands will need to generate local wins first to scale into larger headlines instead of relying on a single national headline win to drive discovery.

Making high-quality content has probably helped you optimize for years, even without knowing it.

To win across both AI and human discovery in 2026, brands will need to treat earned authority as the shared core of SEO and PR, rather than two separate programs.

AI has increased the value of earned media by making its ROI easier to evaluate and, when it compounds through a flywheel effect, strengthens brand visibility and authority.

# Your 2026 Earned Media Checklist

## STRATEGY

- Align SEO and PR teams around shared authority-building goals
- Create an “outside-in” storytelling plan, with broader industry narratives where your brand fits and consider cadence
- Identify the right outlets to target based on LLM citation patterns in your vertical

## DISTRIBUTION

- Evaluate current distribution channels
- Consider distribution partnerships for developing authority at scale
- Verify canonical tags are correctly implemented

## CONTENT

- Audit your owned content for “communications debt”: is it good enough to be cited in earned media or LLMs? What clear value is this giving the reader?
- Ensure all owned content has expert bylines with author pages
- Use first-person language and conversational tone where appropriate
- Add FAQ structures to capture conversational queries
- Create transcripts and metadata for audio/video content
- Develop first-party data and original research assets

## MONITORING

- Add LLM presence to quarterly comms scorecard
- Set up monitoring tools
- Track Share of Answer for key branded and comparative queries
- Monitor competitor citation gaps for PR opportunities
- Implement sentiment monitoring and response plan for social/community posts

## MEASUREMENT

- Shift metrics from traffic-first to authority-first
- Identify vulnerable search queries and their historical CTR patterns
- Build reporting that demonstrates the value that earned media is bringing to your business, whether that’s traditional EMV or a quantified number of AI citations across platforms or earned pickups.