Kickstand

PR in the Age of AI:
The New Playbook

It's time to face the facts: AI is changing the world of PR and marketing as we know it, and there's no turning back. Whether you're incorporating AI-powered tools into your workflows or strategizing about how to make your content stand out in a saturated market, every marketing team is asking themselves two questions right now:

How do you drive brand influence in today's environment?

How do you win on findability in an AI search world?

Let's tackle these one at a time.

✦ How do we drive brand influence in today's environment?

First, we have to think of AI's "new normal" as a positive: the opportunity to create influence is bigger than it ever has been. HubSpot estimates[1] that it takes about eight touchpoints (emails, meetings, interacting with your content online) for today's buyer to make a decision.

But with 69% of the buying process happening before a prospect even engages with sales,[2] that means buyers are consulting more channels during their preliminary research. It means they're consuming and engaging with different types of content in different ways.

Your brand's marketing opportunity is growing, but only if you stay adaptable to constant change. For marketers, thriving in this new era requires a deeper understanding of your audience than ever before.

✦ How do we win on findability in an AI search world?

Second, more and more searches are starting on AI search engines (Google Search's AI Overviews, ChatGPT Search, Perplexity AI, Bing Copilot, etc.) than traditional search. That means SEO is no longer a keyword game, but a query game centered on buyer education.

Today, folks can find the answers to most of what they need without ever having to click through to the information's source. When they need more information, they just submit another query, rinse, and repeat. As the LLMs that power AI search become more sophisticated, their results will continue to shift from information aggregation and summaries to contextual, personalized recommendations and active assistance.

	Information	Recommendation
Query	I want Italian for dinner tonight. I live in Austin, TX. Where should I go?	I want Italian for dinner tonight. I live in Austin, TX. Where should I go?
AI's response	Here are five Italian restaurants in downtown Austin: 1. Red Ash Italia 2. Dean's Italian Steakhouse 3. Taverna 4. Sammie's Italian 5. North Italia	Based on your past reviews of restaurants that highlight your love of tiramisu, you should try Red Ash Italia. Would you like me to book a 7pm reservation?

That means winning in AI search isn't just about showing up; it's about showing up consistently and in a positive way that ensures this evolution favors your brand.

1   https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/the-ultimate-guide-to-prospecting-how-many-touchpoints-when-and-what-type
2   https://6sense.com/science-of-b2b/2024-buyer-experience-report/

As we think about building presence in today's discovery landscape, we need to accept two truths: first, influence is shaped by where and how your brand is documented; second, AI-driven search prioritizes the most reader-optimized, aggregated version of that documentation. If you accept both of these, then starting an intentional strategy about how and where you document knowledge about your brand should be your most urgent, critical, and consistent marketing investment right now.

AI search will be the biggest boom for marketing and PR pros since the .com bubble. But right now, most agencies are failing to connect the dots. Their AI efforts are focused around measurement and driving operational efficiencies, when in reality, we need to use AI as a lens to completely reimagine the work we do—from the ground up.

The marketing game is constantly changing. The CMO role is arguably the toughest at any company, as it's a position that requires you to become an expert in constantly changing channels, technology, and buyer preferences—and you have to do it all at breakneck speeds. Not to mention the fact that CMOs are held to a high standard when it comes to proving the value of every single investment.

> **When evaluating potential partners, CMOs need to be intentional about bringing in trusted advisors who have invested in tracking down the answers when it comes to connecting PR and AI findability. You need partners with a strong POV and proven success navigating the new influence landscape.**

All of this is to say: the playbook for winning is changing. Only the brands that evolve and pivot quickly will find themselves on top in the new world of AI. And we can help you get there.
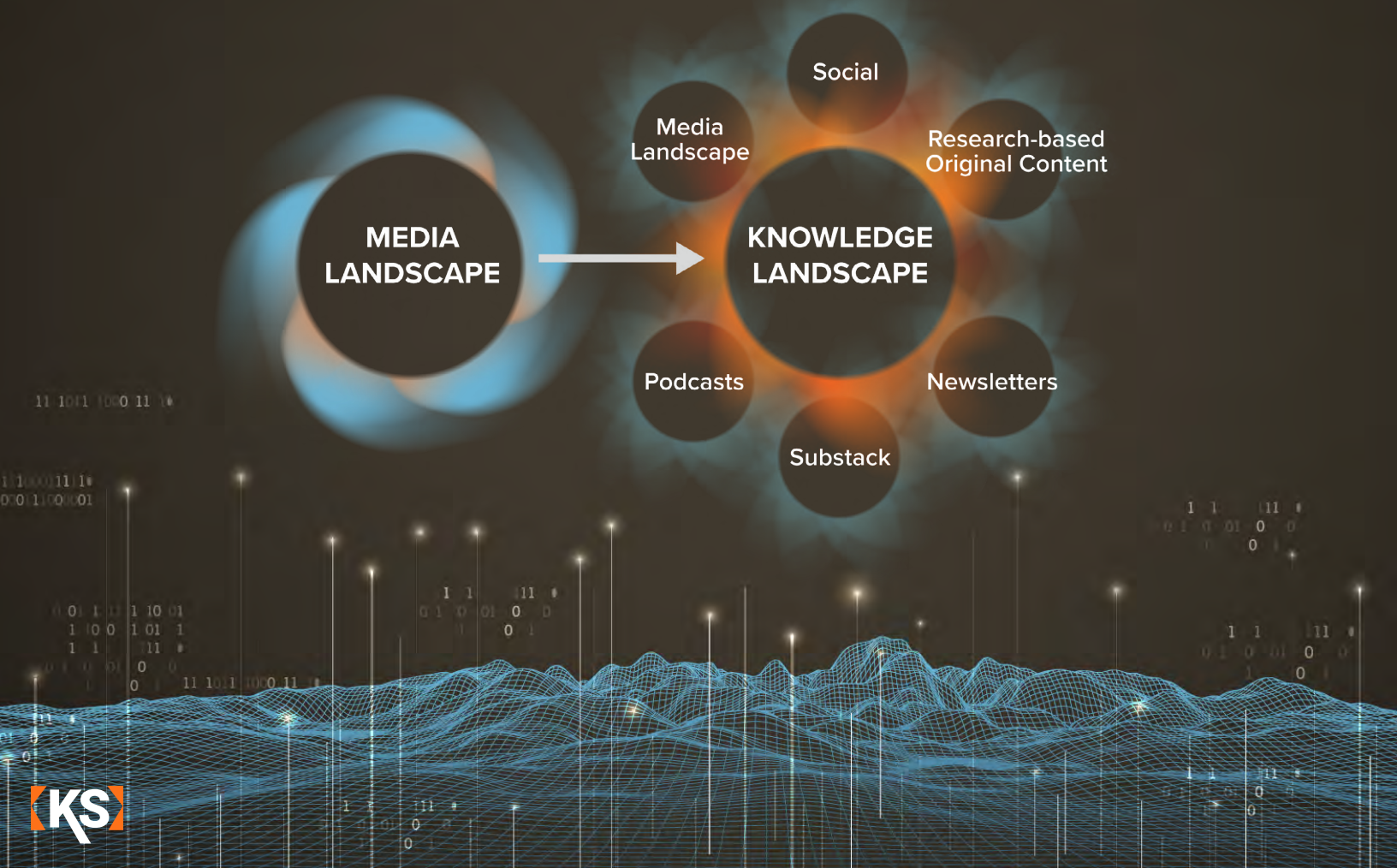
Let's start by taking a look at "traditional" PR tactics. Building media relationships, for example, will always be an important part of the PR puzzle. 12 years into this business, we're proud of the relationships we've nurtured with top media contacts, and we will always work to bring the value of those connections to our clients.

But here's the thing: media relationships and a handful of tier one articles can no longer be the lifeblood of a PR program. This simply isn't enough to drive influence where you need to in today's AI-powered world.

There are a number of factors contributing to this shift. Media outlets are facing more pressure to drive eyeballs, clicks, and revenue, and it's happening amid heavy M&A and industry consolidation. Just this year we've seen shakeups in some of the biggest outlets in tech, with TechCrunch and Strictly VC getting acquired by Yahoo. We also saw Ziff Davis acquire Lifehacker, CNET, and The Skimm in recent years. What's more, mainstream media outlets are continuing to eliminate staff, with more and more content being created by freelance writers.

As well-known authorities leave traditional outlets to start their own platforms on social channels and media platforms like Substack, we're seeing the rise of independent media, and newsletters are back in a big way. That means the line between media contact and influencer is blurring, and with more channels to saturate than ever before (podcasts, YouTube, etc.), it might disappear altogether.

MEDIA LANDSCAPE → KNOWLEDGE LANDSCAPE

Social • Media Landscape • Research-based Original Content • Podcasts • Newsletters • Substack

So, what does this all mean for PR?

It means we need to redefine what we think success looks like. Instead of starting with a broad concept of our audience and media landscape, we need to start with real data on our Ideal Customer Profiles (ICPs) and a map of our broader "knowledge landscape."

ICPs need to include every key segment you're looking to influence: investors, talent, prospects, customers, etc. And the profiles should be as detailed as possible. Who exactly are they? What are their motivators and barriers? Most importantly, how and where are they influenced?

Investors, for example, might spend more time on LinkedIn (and they do—9 out of 10 investors[3] use this platform to evaluate the leadership teams of potential investments), while prospects of another demographic might love email newsletters. Wherever it is, your brand needs to be there.

Your influence program should be comprehensive and reflect where your audiences live—from social media to podcasts to review sites, community memberships, analyst reports, and blogs. For example, sites like Substack, Beehiiv, and Patreon have grown in popularity with many industry influencers launching their own paid subscriptions. At the same time, referrals from peer networks often carry weight due to trust—so it's important to keep your brand highly visible and top of mind in relevant community conversations.

While some platforms or communities may have smaller audiences, always consider that subscriber bases are often made up of highly qualified hand-raisers who pay for and regularly engage with the content. Ensuring a diversified approach to winning brand influence is key as the buyer journey increases in complexity, and the mix and weight of each channel should be regularly evaluated as your company, products, and buyer preferences evolve.
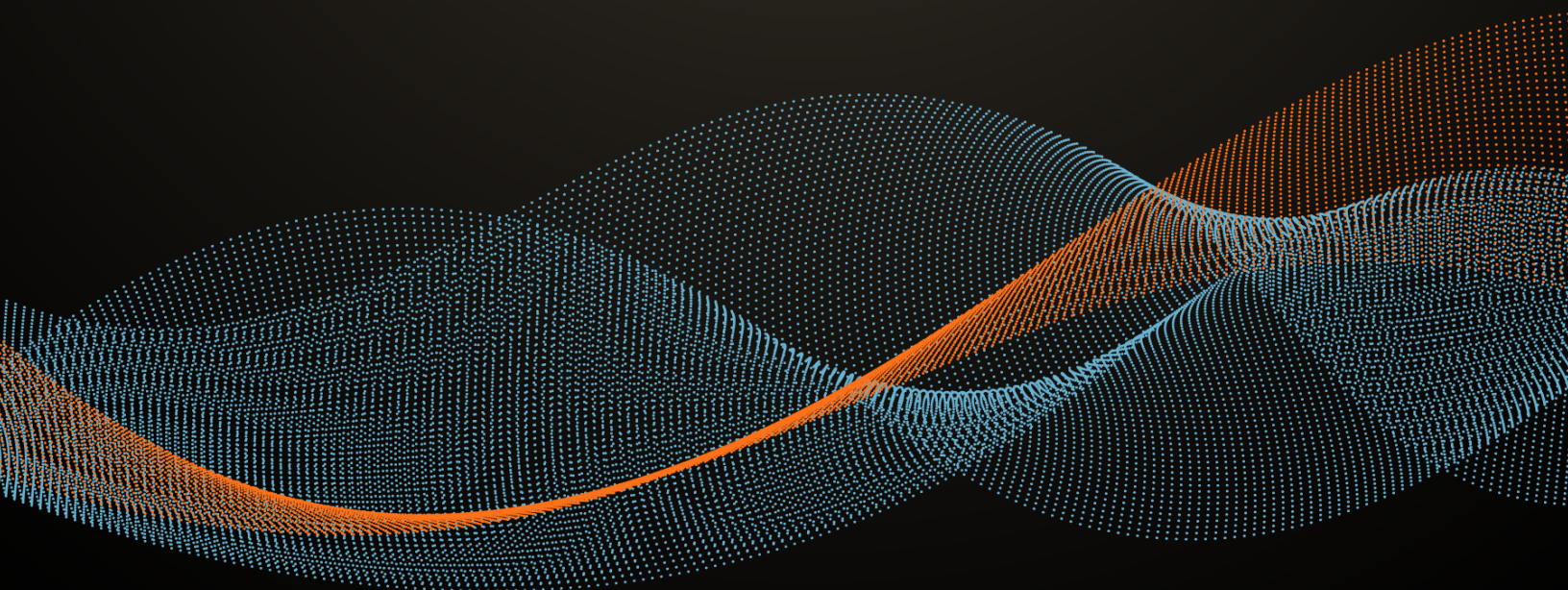
Trust the data

Traditionally, PR agencies have treated data as an output. But by grounding your programs in a deep understanding of your ICP and a map of your brand's knowledge landscape, you more effectively start from a place of data, which greatly increases the likelihood of success.

The result is a map of where and how you'll begin to intentionally document knowledge about your brand. Because when you ground your program strategy in deep ICP data, combined with information on the most relevant conversations for your brand, the where, how, and when become crystal clear.

This data set should be seen as a living asset that evolves along with your business. When updating your program strategy, gut check against every profile to ensure they still ring true, then make any adjustments based on changes or additional ICPs. Complete this process any time you launch into a new vertical or after an acquisition. If your buyer set expands, it's time to take another look at the data.

Now on to some good news! This knowledge mapping exercise is the first step to taking advantage of your influence opportunity and improving your inclusion in AI search. Because once again for the folks in the back, if AI is composed of all documented knowledge, *you need a plan to document knowledge.* Otherwise you'll watch your competitors win over and over again.

AI search may not be the be-all end-all for the future of marketing, but it's certainly the biggest area of change and opportunity right now. Every PR program should be built or re-evaluated through the lens of how effectively it supports AI search findability, because buyers are leveraging AI to conduct a lot of their early research and define their consideration set.

First impressions matter

Being in that early consideration set is a must. Data from Bain and Google[4] revealed that 90% of buyers ultimately choose a vendor from their first consideration set. Conversely, if you're not on that initial list, your chance of closing a deal drops to just 17%[5].

4 https://hbr.org/2022/09/what-b2bs-need-to-know-about-their-buyers
5 https://customerthink.com/the-recipe-for-content-that-creates-mental-availability/

AI vs. traditional search

But how different can AI search really be from traditional SEO? We touched on this earlier, but let's dive a little bit deeper. There are three major differentiators between the two:

Bye-bye, scrolling

When you can't find what you're looking for on the first page of Google's search results, there are nearly an infinite number of other results you can look through. Showing up on page 2 or 3 of a certain keyword search is no longer enough in an AI search environment. You're either included in the AI engine's output, or you aren't.

Takeaway: Your window of opportunity is both critical and short-lived.
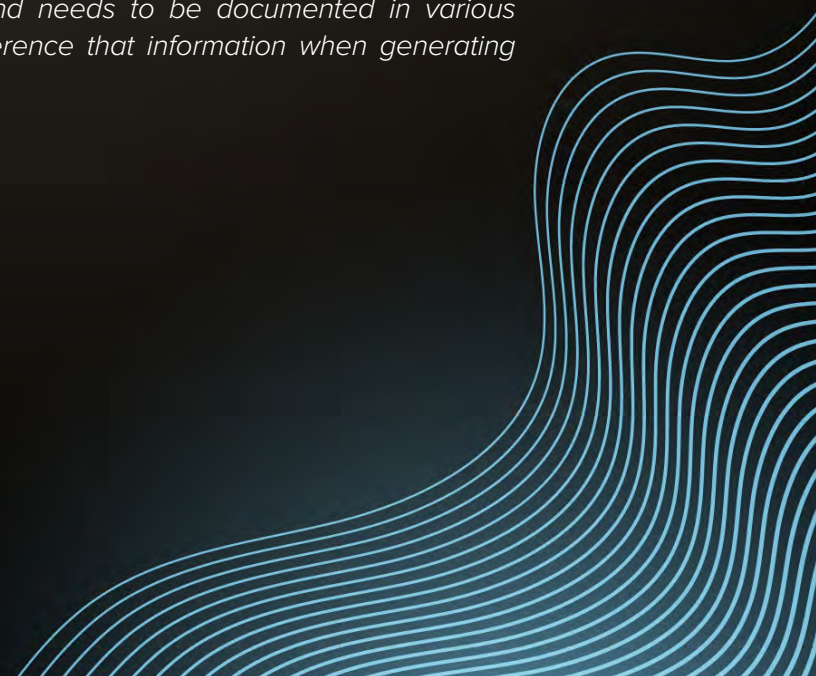
From keywords to queries

Back in the olden days (say, 2022), if you were looking for sales enablement software, you would simply type "sales enablement software" into a search engine and scroll through different vendors. But that's not how we talk to AI; instead, we ask it full questions. Today, you might type into your platform of choice, "What is the best sales enablement software for a business with my unique needs?"

Takeaway: Identify the most common questions your ICP is likely asking as it relates to the challenges you solve for. These are what you should be addressing across the channels that influence LLMs.

The rise of zero-click search

Brands can no longer rely on click throughs back to their websites. "Zero-click search" means you'll need more content and inclusion in offsite conversations that educate readers. The new expectation is that searchers can get most of the information they need when chatting with AI.

Takeaway: Knowledge about your brand needs to be documented in various locations online, so AI engines can reference that information when generating outputs.

The three V's

Today, the most used AI search engines include the likes of Google Gemini, OpenAI's ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, and Bing. But we're still in the early days of AI search, which means we'll see a lot of new entrants - and a lot of change as the features of each mature.

No matter what, understanding the nuances of the varying LLMs matters, and there's a lot left to learn. What we do know is that many of the principles that define good PR will help brands stand out even more in an AI search world. When it comes to executing on an AI search-informed program today, we focus on three key areas of influence, or what we call the "three V's": volume, validation, and value.

Volume

To be clear, we're not just talking about a high volume of brand mentions here - we're talking about consistency and recency across all channels. That means developing consistent brand messaging and platforms for spokespeople to own is more important than ever to help educate the LLMs. And regular, highly relevant posting and mentions are key, especially as AI search engines evolve into recommendation engines.

It's also crucial to diversify your owned, offsite content, because some LLMs weight various content types differently.

> **Google AI Overviews are increasingly turning to YouTube as a trusted source. YouTube citations[6] surged by 25% between January and February 2025, which suggests AI favors video for instructional content, demonstrations, and more.**

PR teams should look for opportunities that offer multi-format content hits. Does that podcast also film its interviews? Do they promote it on social media? Will there be an accompanying blog post? Volume and variety (that's another V!) will be your friends here.

Validation

Amid constant change, authority still matters. Sites perceived to be highly credible, including media outlets, will weigh more heavily, so be intentional with your targets. And this doesn't just mean highly-sought after tier one outlets. Inclusion in industry-specific trade publications can be extremely effective for training LLMs to connect your brand to messaging that's contextually relevant for your specific ICPs.

Third-party credibility via well-known awards that recognize your company's work, team, and culture are key. When evaluating opportunities, look at how the selected winners are promoted. This will be an even more important factor in determining which opportunities to prioritize.

The same goes on the speaking front. Getting your SMEs featured on influential sites promoting speaking engagements on topics aligned with your messaging can help improve your AI search rankings. How does the event promote speakers beforehand? What kind of content do they share after the fact?

Additionally, what podcasts or video series hosted by credible organizations can you introduce your SMEs to? Put on your SEO-era thinking cap here: how can you tap into the credibility of existing sources to establish and validate your brand's own authority?

Value

In a sea of sameness, original thought leadership is necessary to stand out among competitors. Unique points of view that focus on educating your ICP on their most common queries will take you far.

One of the best ways to do this effectively is through the use of unique, owned data.[7] Original research affirms your commitment to understanding your audience, and it helps connect the dots between the bigger picture and the problem your brand solves. It can also be spun into multiple formats—from educational videos to podcast interviews to designed carousels for social media—and thus leveraged across multiple channels.

A brand new dataset that's unique to your brand and answers common queries? That's catnip to AI —and a big boost to brand awareness.

Brands that have been investing in forward-thinking PR are already seeing the benefits when it comes to AI search. Consider this case study from our client, Outrider.

Outrider's primary marketing channel is PR. Kickstand has been their agency since launching from stealth in 2019, and they're the creator of the distribution yard automation category. But they've seen notable new entry throughout the last six years, and while they remain the leader, the industry now presents emerging competitors.

However, thanks to the PR foundation we've laid with Outrider over the years, a simple Google search of, "What are the top companies in yard automation?" yields the following result:

> **According to current information, Outrider is the leading company focused on yard automation, specializing in autonomous yard operations for logistics hubs, where they automate all aspects of yard operations using a system of autonomous vehicles and cloud-based software.**

Since signing on with Outrider, we've helped them document a vast amount of knowledge about their brand via interviews, blog posts, press releases, and more. Their consistent inclusion and leadership positioning in Google AI Overviews is proof of the impact strategic, multichannel PR efforts can have in the age of AI.

A common thread

We recently completed a project assessing AI search performance across a number of our long-term clients. We found two distinct commonalities:

1. Those that outperform their competitors in PR were also outperforming them in AI search.
2. AI search is proving to be much less competitive for them than traditional SEO.

What this indicates to us is that AI search likes PR a whole awful lot. PR's principles and the channels we utilize have always been key in driving brand awareness, credibility, and trust; AI search has just made that connection much more direct and visibly impactful.

The age-old question in PR of "How do we measure success?" has at once become more complex and more easily answered thanks to AI.

AI has amplified the speed, scale, and potential scope of coverage, creating a constantly evolving web of influence. Traditional measurement methods like share of voice still matter, but they don't paint the full picture. In rethinking our approach to PR, we also have to reconsider how we define and track performance.

What matters to machines?

As AI models increasingly serve as the gatekeepers of public knowledge that summarize and surface "the best" answers, PR must adapt its metrics to include what machines care about.

Are you consistently included in the AI search results of your ICP's most common queries? Is your brand' messaging being accurately represented in AI-generated summaries? Is your owned content and research data being referenced as a credible source in target conversations? Are journalists citing your messaging in a way that AI will pick up and amplify?

We now live in an environment where a single authoritative mention can ripple through AI systems and shape brand narratives at scale. Ensuring that earned media and owned content feeds the AI ecosystem with credible, consistent messaging is no longer optional - it's critical for success.

Measuring influence, not just output

It's tempting to rely on dashboards full of numbers, but the most forward-thinking brands are redefining success in terms of influence rather than sheer output. Influence is harder to quantify, but it can be measured through indicators like:

- Shifts in brand perception or key association terms over time
- Increases in branded search
- Increased following or engagement on social
- Increased web traffic from PR-driven articles and content or from AI search
- Shorter sales cycles for PR-driven leads
- Increases in inbound media requests
- How often your SMEs' quotes are used in authoritative outlets or picked up by AI-generated content

Influence also means being part of the conversation when it matters most: during breaking news, trend spikes, or cultural moments. AI can help spot these opportunities and measure how effectively a brand shows up when the spotlight's on.

> **In short, measurement in the AI era demands a mindset shift: from static to dynamic, from descriptive to predictive, and from quantity to contextual quality.**

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CONCLUSION

With the rise of AI search, PR is a more critical to brand success than ever before. To succeed, we don't need to abandon the fundamentals —we need to evolve them. Relationship-building, channel orchestration, and audience alignment still matter. But in the AI era, brands must layer precision on top of presence. Influence is no longer just earned—it's engineered.

To compete, brands must build a discoverable, defensible knowledge footprint that serves both decision-makers and algorithms. That takes more than mentions and basic content. It takes strategy, structure, and a deep understanding of how influence is indexed.

Kickstand is already helping the most ambitious brands do exactly that. Ready to win?

LET'S TALK

Kickstand

ABOUT KICKSTAND

Kickstand is a global marketing agency specializing in support of high growth technology brands. Offering a data first approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries including mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech, insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and eCommerce. For more information about our approach and how we help brands scale and successfully exit, www.meetkickstand.com