

You can't optimise your way into *the answer*.

AI visibility has stopped being a page-level game and become a **topic-level** one. New research across 1,094 categories finds that **85% of them have no clear owner yet**, and that domain authority predicts who wins about as well as a coin flip. Meanwhile **85% of the brand mentions AI serves up come from third-party editorial, not from the brand's own site**. Here is what that actually means for where your next budget goes.

BY SCOTT PURCELL, CO-FOUNDER, MAN OF MANY

A field guide for anyone being sold an "AI visibility strategy" this quarter

6-MIN READ

15.2%

of AI topic categories have a **clear owner**. The other 85% are still contestable. The land is being claimed right now.

SEMRUSH · 1,094 CATEGORIES · JUL 2026

90.4%

month-on-month **retention** once a category is owned. Incumbency is real, and it is forming this year.

SEMRUSH · JUL 2026

~50%

of the time domain-level SEO metrics predict topic ownership. **A coin flip**. Authority Score does not buy the answer.

SEMRUSH · JUL 2026

85%

of brand mentions in AI answers come from **third-party editorial**, not the brand's own site. ~90% of those from round-ups.

AIROPS · 21,311 MENTIONS · OCT 2025

PART ONE · THE LAND GRAB

WHAT THE RESEARCH ACTUALLY FOUND

The unit of competition is no longer the page.

Semrush analysed 1,094 ChatGPT categories and set a deliberately hard bar for what counts as "owning" one: you have to appear across at least **four of five related prompts**, with a five-point lead over the runner-up. Winning a single prompt is not owning a topic.

On that measure, only **15.2%** of categories have a clear owner. And the strongest finding is the uncomfortable one for anyone selling site-level fixes: **domain-level SEO metrics lined up with topic ownership only about half the time**.

Strong SEO gets you eligible. **Deep, sustained coverage of a specific subject** decides who gets served. The asset is not the page any more. It is the corpus: the body of work built on a topic over years.

Which is why the shortcut does not exist. You can buy a page. You cannot retroactively buy a decade of independent coverage on a subject, and the model can tell the difference. **What you can buy is a place inside someone else's**.

"Winning one prompt in ChatGPT is not the same as owning a topic."

SEMRUSH · 1,094-CATEGORY STUDY · 20 JULY 2026

AND THE WINDOW IS CLOSING

Category owners held first place in **90.4%** of month-on-month comparisons, and topical authority then decides whether you surface for *new* queries that did not exist when you published. That is a land-grab dynamic. The 85% unclaimed today will not stay unclaimed for long.

THE PITCH · WHAT YOU'RE SOLD	THE REALITY · WHAT THE DATA SAYS
"Buy our dashboard and track your AI rank."	There is no stable rank to track. Under 1 in 100 chance the same prompt returns the same brand list twice.
"Add schema and an llms.txt and you'll get cited."	Schema moved AI Overview citations -4.6% across 1,885 pages. llms.txt shows zero relationship with citations.
"Your domain authority will carry you into AI."	It predicts topic ownership ~50% of the time. Depth on the subject beats size of the domain.
"Publish more AI-assisted content at scale."	54% of sites scaling AI content lost 30%+ of peak traffic. 22% are down more than 75%.
"Optimise your own site and the answers will follow."	85% of brand mentions come from someone else's editorial. Your own site is not the lever.

"Generative AI features like AI Mode are built directly on top of our core ranking systems. Stop optimising for bots. Focus on people."

BRENDON KRAHAM · VP, GOOGLE

THE SHORT VERSION

Good SEO is good GEO. ChatGPT grounds in Bing, Claude in Brave, Perplexity in both. **The "AI surface" is the surface you already optimise for**. What changes is not the mechanism, it is *who gets quoted*, and that is decided by editorial depth and third-party trust, which are bought differently from clicks.

THE RECEIPTS	TACTICS SOLD AS AI-NATIVE
Schema markup → AI Overview citations Ahrefs, 1,885 pages	-4.6%
llms.txt → citation correlation SE Ranking, ~300k domains	NONE
Same prompt, same brand list twice SparkToro, 2,961 prompts	<1%
Domain metrics → topic ownership Semrush, 1,094 categories	~50%

VERDICT

Buying the wrong thing

OUR OWN NUMBER, AND IT IS SMALL

We measure this on our own property and we will say the unpopular part out loud: **AI assistants send us 0.59% of our sessions, and that figure fell 19% year on year**.

Anyone selling you an AI *traffic* strategy is selling you a rounding error. The value did not move to the AI click. It moved to **being the source that gets cited**, which is a different product, bought in a different way.

Man of Many GA4, property 308448771. Rolling 90 days to 22 Jul 2026 vs same window 2025. Assistant referrers only; excludes DuckDuckGo. Total site sessions were also down 16.4% over the period.

THE ZERO-CLICK SQUEEZE

68% of Google searches now end without a click, rising to **83%** where an AI Overview appears. Every 1,000 searches sends just **276** clicks to the open web.

But **78%** of Australian AI-tool users read the summary *and then visit sites* for detail, and **92%** still use search or retail sites to research and compare.

SparkToro/Similarweb, Jun 2026 · IAB Australia & Pureprofile, Commerce & Discovery Report 2026, n=1,079

But you can buy your way in.

Buy the citation, not the click. If 85% of what AI says about your brand comes from third-party editorial, and topics are won by depth rather than domain size, then the highest-leverage line in a media plan is the one that puts you inside coverage a model already trusts. Seven things that hold up to scrutiny.

THE PLAYBOOK · SEVEN THINGS

EVIDENCE-BACKED, VENDOR-NEUTRAL

- 01

Fund earned editorial, not AI dashboards.
85% of AI brand mentions originate in third-party editorial and roughly 90% of those sit in listicles and round-ups. The trusted editorial mention is the new backlink. It is also the only one you cannot fake.
- 02

Pick topics, not keywords.
Ownership means showing up across four of five related prompts. Brief your partners around a subject you intend to own for two years, not a term you want to rank for this quarter.
- 03

Move now on the unclaimed 85%.
Categories retain their owner 90.4% of the time month to month. The cost of entering a category rises the longer you wait. This is a land grab with a closing window.
- 04

Do the fundamentals harder.
Authority, technical health, E-E-A-T. Google has said plainly that AI Mode is built on its core ranking systems. Check Bing Webmaster Tools and welcome BraveBot: that is where ChatGPT and Claude ground.
- 05

Build brand demand.
Brand search volume is the strongest single predictor of LLM citation, outweighing backlinks. Upper-funnel work is now a visibility input, not a separate budget line.
- 06

Change the measure before the click disappears.
Every 1,000 searches now returns 276 clicks. If the click is your only proof of value you will under-report exactly the channels that are working. Measure citation, brand search lift and assisted conversion.
- 07

Avoid anything that only works until it is caught.
Bot-only markdown pages risk being read as cloaking under Google's site reputation abuse policy. 54% of sites scaling AI content lost 30%+ of peak traffic. Do not buy a tactic that carries a documented downside.
- A note on fairness.**
Most vendors in this space are not con artists, and a handful of these tactics move the needle a little. The risk is the trade-off: reallocating budget out of editorial and earned media into AI dashboards is a bad swap on the evidence. Do the fundamentals. Then experiment at the margins.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS · VETTING A PUBLISHER PARTNER

APPLY THEM TO US. APPLY THEM TO EVERYONE.

01 Industry authority Has the publisher earned independent, verifiable industry recognition, or does it only cite itself? Mumbrella Media Brand of the Year 2025. Website of the Year 2020, 2023, 2024, 2025.	02 Editorial standards Are they accountable to a recognised press body with published, enforceable standards? Australian Press Council member.	03 Human, expert-reviewed Are humans actually writing it, and is health, finance or safety content reviewed by credentialed experts? 100% human editorial. Dietitians, psychologists and dermatologists review YMYL.	04 Topic depth Can they show sustained, multi-year coverage of your category: the corpus, not a campaign? #1 across our competitive set for uniqueness on Parallel Web Systems' AI Index.	05 Audience quality Real reach to the right reader, with verifiable audience data rather than a headline number? Australia's largest men's lifestyle site. \$140k average household income, metropolitan decision-makers.
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#1 across our competitive set for uniqueness (how hard our work is to substitute) and for impressions, citations and value. PARALLEL WEB SYSTEMS AI INDEX	6M+ cross-platform monthly reach, across site, social, video and newsletter. MAN OF MANY, 2026	100% human-written editorial, with named bylines and expert review on YMYL categories. EDITORIAL POLICY	5× Mumbrella Publish Award wins, including Media Brand of the Year 2025. 2020, 2023, 2024, 2025
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The trusted editorial mention is the new backlink.

We are not selling an AI visibility product, because we do not think one honestly exists yet. We are selling the thing the research keeps pointing back to: original reporting, real-world testing and human expertise on topics we have covered for over a decade: the coverage models cite and readers still trust.

If you want to talk about owning a category before someone else does, start here.

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WINNER · MEDIA BRAND OF THE YEAR, MUMBRELLA 2025
WINNER · WEBSITE OF THE YEAR, MUMBRELLA PUBLISH 2020, 2023, 2024, 2025
WINNER · B&T AWARD FOR THE PLANET 2024 · BEST MEDIA PLATFORM, B&T 2023