

STRATEGY

Earned Media Now Beats Your Website for AI Visibility

By Scott Tischler · September 8, 2026 · 9 min read

The most important shift in AI visibility this year is also the most uncomfortable one: what other credible sites say about you now matters more than anything you publish on your own. Your website is still necessary — but it has quietly stopped being the thing that decides whether an AI engine recommends you. Earned media does. And most businesses are still spending 90% of their effort on the surface that moves the needle least.

I want to be careful here, because this is easy to overstate. Your own site is not useless — it's your canonical source of truth, and a broken or thin site will sink you no matter what. But among businesses that have the basics right, the ones AI answers actually reach for are the ones corroborated by sources they don't control. That's my read from watching how ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google's AI answers assemble responses, and it lines up with what the wider industry is now reporting: AI engines lean toward authoritative third-party sources over brand-owned content. If that's right — and I think it is — it changes where you should be spending.

Why a model trusts a third party more than it trusts you

Put yourself in the model's position. It's trying to answer a question and it needs sources it can trust. You, the business, have an obvious incentive to say good things about yourself. A neutral third party — a journalist, an industry publication, a forum full of real users, a review site, another expert — doesn't carry that same incentive. So when the model sees the same claim about you echoed by sources that have no reason to flatter you, its confidence goes up in a way your own marketing copy can never achieve.

This is the corroboration principle, and it's not new — it's how humans evaluate claims too. What's new is how directly it now governs AI visibility. A claim that lives only on your website is a single data point from an interested party. The same claim, repeated across earned media, becomes something the model treats as established. You didn't just assert it; the world confirmed it.

What "earned media" actually means for AEO

People hear "earned media" and think of a front-page feature in a major outlet. That's part of it, but it's the narrow part. For AI visibility, earned media is anything credible that you didn't publish and can't fully control, that mentions or corroborates you:

- **Press and industry publications** — being quoted, featured, or cited by outlets in your space. Trade publications often punch above their weight here because they're topically dense and trusted on the exact subject.
- **Expert roundups and guest contributions** — your name and view appearing in other people's authoritative content.
- **Forums and community discussion** — Reddit threads, Stack Exchange, niche communities, real people recommending you unprompted. These are corroboration the model reads as genuine because it is.
- **Review sites and directories** — credible, structured third-party listings that confirm your existence and category.
- **Podcasts, interviews, and citations in other creators' work** — you referenced as a source by people building their own authority.
- **Reference-grade sources** — the hardest and most valuable, like Wikipedia or Wikidata, which many models treat as a trust backbone.

Notice what these have in common: none of them are things you can simply write and publish this afternoon. That's exactly why they carry weight. The difficulty is the signal.

The uncomfortable reallocation

Here's the part most businesses resist. If earned media is what moves AI visibility, then the honest conclusion is that a meaningful share of the effort currently going into your website should shift toward earning mentions off of it. Not all of it — you still need a clean, crawlable, well-structured site as your foundation. But the marginal hour is better spent getting corroborated elsewhere than polishing a landing page for the ninth time.

That's a hard sell internally, because your website is the thing you control, and earned media is the thing you don't. Control feels productive. But AI engines have essentially priced in your lack of control as a trust feature — the very fact that you can't dictate what a third party says is why the model believes it. You have to make peace with earning outcomes you can influence but not command.

How to earn it — honestly

Let me be blunt about the line here, because it matters: the goal is to *earn* corroboration, never to manufacture it. Fake reviews, planted astroturf, paid mentions dressed up as organic — these are both detectable and a fast way to torch the credibility you're trying to build. The engines are getting better at discounting manipulated signals, and a business caught faking consensus can do itself lasting damage. Everything below is about deserving the mention, not gaming it:

- **Be genuinely quotable.** Have a clear, specific point of view that a journalist or creator would actually want to cite. Vague, hedge-everything positions don't get quoted. Take a real stance and defend it.
- **Be reachable and responsive.** A lot of earned media goes to whoever answered the reporter's query fast with something useful. Make yourself easy to find and quick to respond.
- **Show up where the conversations already happen.** Be a real, helpful participant in the communities and forums where your customers talk — not a drive-by promoter. Genuine contribution earns genuine mentions.
- **Give people accurate, repeatable facts about you.** Make your key facts consistent everywhere so that when someone does mention you, they get it right — and the model sees the same story from multiple sources.
- **Publish things worth referencing.** Original research, useful frameworks, honest data — the kind of work other people cite because it helps them. Owned content still matters here, not as the destination but as the thing that earns the link.

Where your website still fits

None of this means you neglect your own site. Think of it as the anchor, not the engine. Your site needs to be crawlable, clearly structured, consistent in its facts, and marked up so machines understand it — because when earned media sends a model looking for you, your site is where it lands to confirm who you are. A strong site with no external corroboration is a witness with no one to vouch for them. Strong corroboration pointing at a broken site is a recommendation you can't cash. You need both, in that order of leverage: foundation first, then earn.

The businesses that win AI recommendations over the next few years won't be the ones with the most polished homepage. They'll be the ones the rest of the internet independently agrees are worth mentioning. Your job is to become genuinely worth mentioning — and then to make it easy for the people who would.

Key takeaways

- ◆ Among businesses with the basics right, AI engines favor authoritative third-party sources over brand-owned content — earned media now outweighs your own website.
- ◆ A model trusts a neutral third party more than you because you have an obvious incentive to flatter yourself and they don't.
- ◆ Earned media for AEO is broader than press: forums, expert roundups, review sites, podcasts, and reference sources like Wikipedia all corroborate you.
- ◆ The honest conclusion is to shift marginal effort from polishing your site toward earning mentions off of it — uncomfortable because you control one and not the other.
- ◆ Earn corroboration, never manufacture it: fake reviews and astroturf are detectable and can do lasting damage.
- ◆ Your website is the anchor, not the engine: keep it crawlable, consistent, and structured so the model can confirm you when earned media sends it looking.

Frequently asked questions

Does this mean my website doesn't matter anymore?

It still matters as your foundation and canonical source of truth — a broken, thin, or uncrawlable site will sink you regardless of earned media. The point is that among businesses with a solid site, the deciding factor for AI recommendations is third-party corroboration. Keep the site strong, but spend marginal effort on earning mentions off of it.

What counts as earned media for AI visibility?

Anything credible that you didn't publish and can't fully control: press and trade-publication coverage, expert roundups and guest contributions, genuine forum and community discussion, credible review sites and directories, podcasts and interviews, and reference-grade sources like Wikipedia or Wikidata. The common thread is that you can't just write and publish them yourself, which is exactly why they carry weight.

Can I just pay for mentions or generate reviews to speed this up?

No — that's the fastest way to damage the credibility you're building. Fabricated consensus, paid mentions dressed as organic, and fake reviews are increasingly detectable and heavily discounted, and a business caught faking can suffer lasting harm. The goal is to deserve the mention by being genuinely quotable, helpful, and consistent — not to game it.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express,

MetLife, and UBS — and executive and professional study at Wharton, Harvard, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.