

HOW AI WORKS

What ChatGPT Actually Sees When It Looks at Your Site

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

Your website looks polished to a human visitor — the design, the images, the smooth interactions. None of that is what an AI reads. Understanding the stripped-down version a machine actually sees is the difference between being understood and being skipped.

This matters because there's often a gap between the site you built for people and the site a machine perceives. You optimized the human experience; the AI is working from something much closer to raw text and structure. When those two diverge — when your best information is locked in an image, or buried under interaction, or contradicted across pages — the machine forms an impression based on the impoverished version, not the beautiful one you see.

What the machine actually reads

Think of it as the text-and-structure skeleton beneath your design. Broadly, here's what tends to come through clearly, and what tends to get lost:

Comes through: your actual text content, your headings and structure, your links, your alt text and metadata, and any structured data you've declared. This is the material the model reasons over — the words and the scaffolding that organizes them.

Often lost or degraded: information that lives only inside images without text equivalents; content that appears only after clicks, hovers, or heavy interaction; anything requiring a human to interpret visual layout to understand; and meaning you intended through design that was never stated in words. If a key fact about you exists only as a graphic or only behind an interaction, the machine may simply never get it.

The common failure

The most frequent version of this problem is the beautiful, sparse page. Design trends favor big images, minimal text, and information conveyed visually. That's lovely for humans and often nearly

empty to a machine. A page that communicates everything through a striking image and three words gives an AI almost nothing to read, understand, or cite. Your best-designed page can be your least legible one.

The second common failure is content trapped behind interaction — tabs, accordions, expandable sections, content that loads only on certain actions. Depending on how it's built, a machine may never trigger the interaction and never see what's inside. The information exists, but not in a form the model reaches.

How to close the gap

- **Put important information in text.** Anything that matters — who you are, what you offer, your key facts and claims — should exist as real, readable text, not only as an image or a visual.
- **Add text equivalents for visual content.** Meaningful alt text and text that conveys what an image or graphic communicates, so the meaning survives.
- **Make sure content is in the readable HTML.** Key content should be present in what a crawler gets, not only assembled after heavy interaction it may not perform.
- **State meaning explicitly.** Don't rely on design to imply things — say them. If your layout implies a relationship or a claim, write it down too.
- **Check the machine's-eye view.** Look at your most important pages as stripped text and ask: does this still communicate who I am and why I'm worth citing?

The reframe

You don't have to choose between a beautiful site and a legible one — you have to make sure the beauty doesn't hide the substance from the machine. Design for humans, but ensure that beneath the design, the text-and-structure version stands on its own. The test is simple: strip your page to its readable content and ask whether an AI could understand what you do and why you're worth naming. If the answer is no, the most polished site in your category is invisible in exactly the place visibility is moving.

Key takeaways

- ✦ AI reads a stripped-down text-and-structure version of your site, not the polished design human visitors see.
- ✦ Text, headings, links, alt text, metadata, and structured data come through; image-only info, interaction-hidden content, and design-implied meaning often get lost.

- ♦ The most common failure is the beautiful, sparse page — striking visuals and minimal text give a machine almost nothing to read or cite.
- ♦ Content trapped behind tabs, accordions, or interactions may never be seen by a crawler that doesn't trigger them.
- ♦ Close the gap: put important information in real text, add text equivalents for visuals, keep key content in readable HTML, and state meaning explicitly.
- ♦ The test: strip a page to its readable content and ask whether an AI could understand what you do and why you're worth naming.

Frequently asked questions

Does AI see my website the way visitors do?

No. Human visitors see your design, images, and interactions; an AI works from a much more stripped-down version — essentially the text and structure beneath the design. Your actual text, headings, links, alt text, metadata, and structured data come through, while information locked in images or hidden behind interactions often doesn't.

Why might my beautiful website be invisible to AI?

Because design that communicates through big visuals and minimal text gives a machine very little to read. A page that conveys everything through a striking image and a few words is lovely for humans and nearly empty to an AI. Similarly, content trapped behind tabs, accordions, or interactions a crawler doesn't trigger may never be seen. The substance has to exist as readable text.

How do I make my site legible to AI without ruining the design?

You don't have to choose. Keep designing for humans, but ensure important information exists as real text, add meaningful text equivalents for visuals, keep key content in the readable HTML rather than behind heavy interaction, and state meaning explicitly instead of implying it through layout. Then strip a page to its text and check that it still communicates who you are and why you're worth citing.

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.