

THE APPROVAL ECONOMY

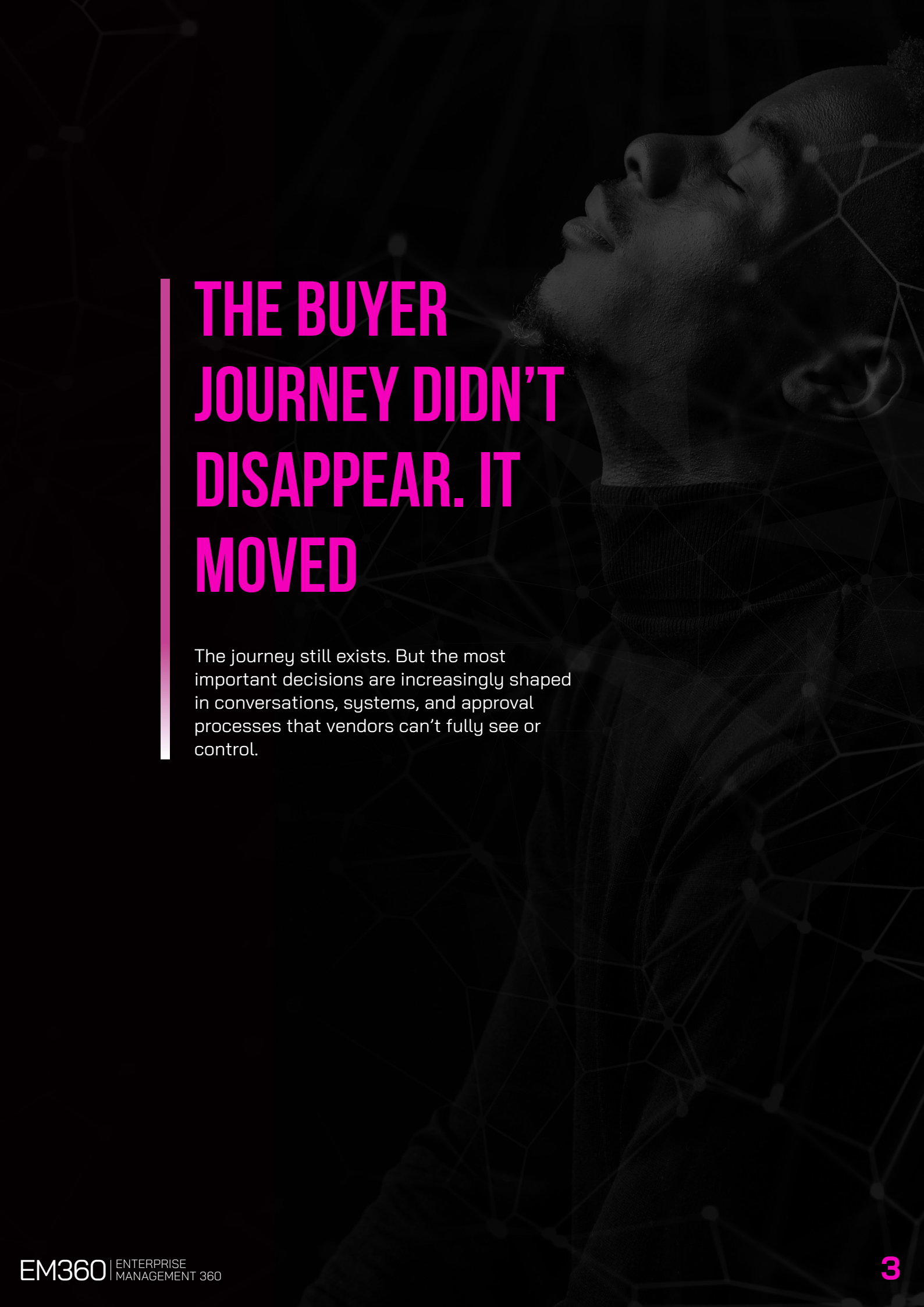
Why Enterprise Marketing Is Losing
Control Of The Buying Journey



EM360

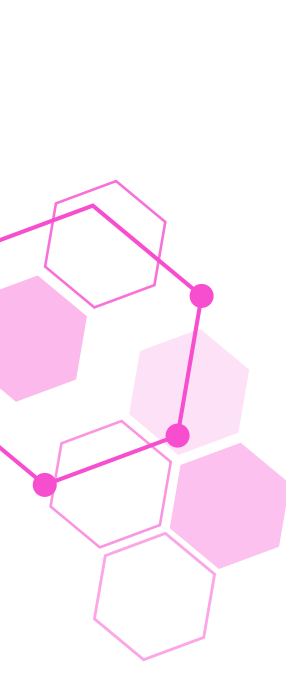
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A black and white photograph of a man with a beard, looking upwards with his eyes closed. The image is overlaid with a dark, geometric network pattern of lines and dots. The text is in a bright pink color.

THE BUYER JOURNEY DIDN'T DISAPPEAR. IT MOVED

The journey still exists. But the most important decisions are increasingly shaped in conversations, systems, and approval processes that vendors can't fully see or control.



A lot of enterprise marketing teams are living with a strange contradiction. They've got more channels, more tools, more intent feeds, more content, more dashboards, and in many cases more output than they had a few years ago. Yet many still feel less certain about what's actually shaping a deal.

Pipeline looks busy. Engagement looks healthy. The market looks reachable. But when buying decisions get serious, the action often seems to happen somewhere else. That isn't because marketers stopped doing the work.

It's because the most important buying work now happens in places the vendor doesn't fully control, can't always see, and often doesn't even enter until later in the process.

That's the core shift, which we're calling the **"approval economy."** In an approval economy, the bottleneck isn't exposure. It isn't information scarcity. It isn't even early-stage curiosity. The bottleneck is whether a buyer can take a potential decision into the organisation and have it survive scrutiny.

Finance wants a credible case.

Security wants fewer unknowns.

Procurement wants a supplier they won't regret backing.

Legal wants obligations understood.

Operations wants a workable rollout.

Leadership wants the purchase to make sense in the bigger picture.

A vendor can win attention and still lose all of that.

That simple distinction matters more than most marketing language suggests. For years, B2B teams have been trained to think in terms of awareness, consideration, conversion, and handoff. That model still captures something real. Buyers do discover, compare, shortlist, and eventually engage.

But the model breaks when it treats visible vendor touchpoints as the whole story. **Recent empirical work on B2B account scoring** makes the limitation plain: account-level buying is shaped by multiple individuals over time, and the internal consultations that actually produce the decision are usually missing from seller-side data.

In other words, the vendor sees fragments. The organisation lives the full conversation. The rise of AI-assisted research makes that gap wider, not smaller. Search is becoming **"answer-first."**

A recent study of 11,500 real-user queries found Google AI Overviews appeared for 51.5% of representative queries and were displayed above organic results, while the sources used by generative search systems differed sharply from those used by traditional search.

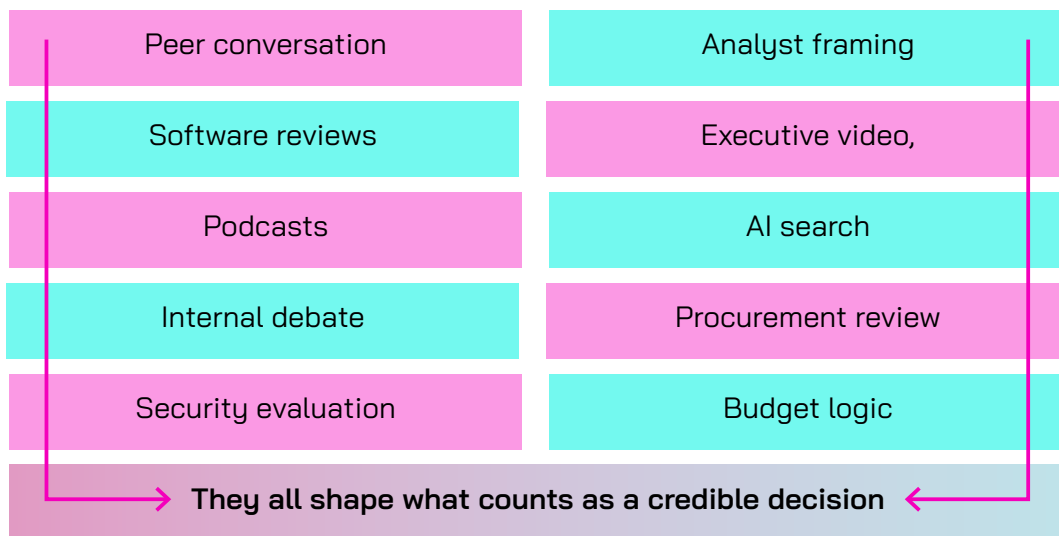
Another large-scale 2026 study found AI Overviews cite pages that don't appear in visible first-page results nearly 30% of the time, which means the logic of influence is no longer identical to the logic of ranking.



AI search isn't simply replacing traditional search. If AI Overviews often choose different sources from traditional Google rankings and frequently cite pages that never appear on the visible first page of results, it means that influence and visibility are becoming separate problems. So a brand can rank well and still be absent from the answer a buyer actually reads.

Buyers can now form impressions from a synthesised answer before they ever evaluate a vendor's site on its own terms. That's why this isn't a report about **"making better content"** in the narrow sense.

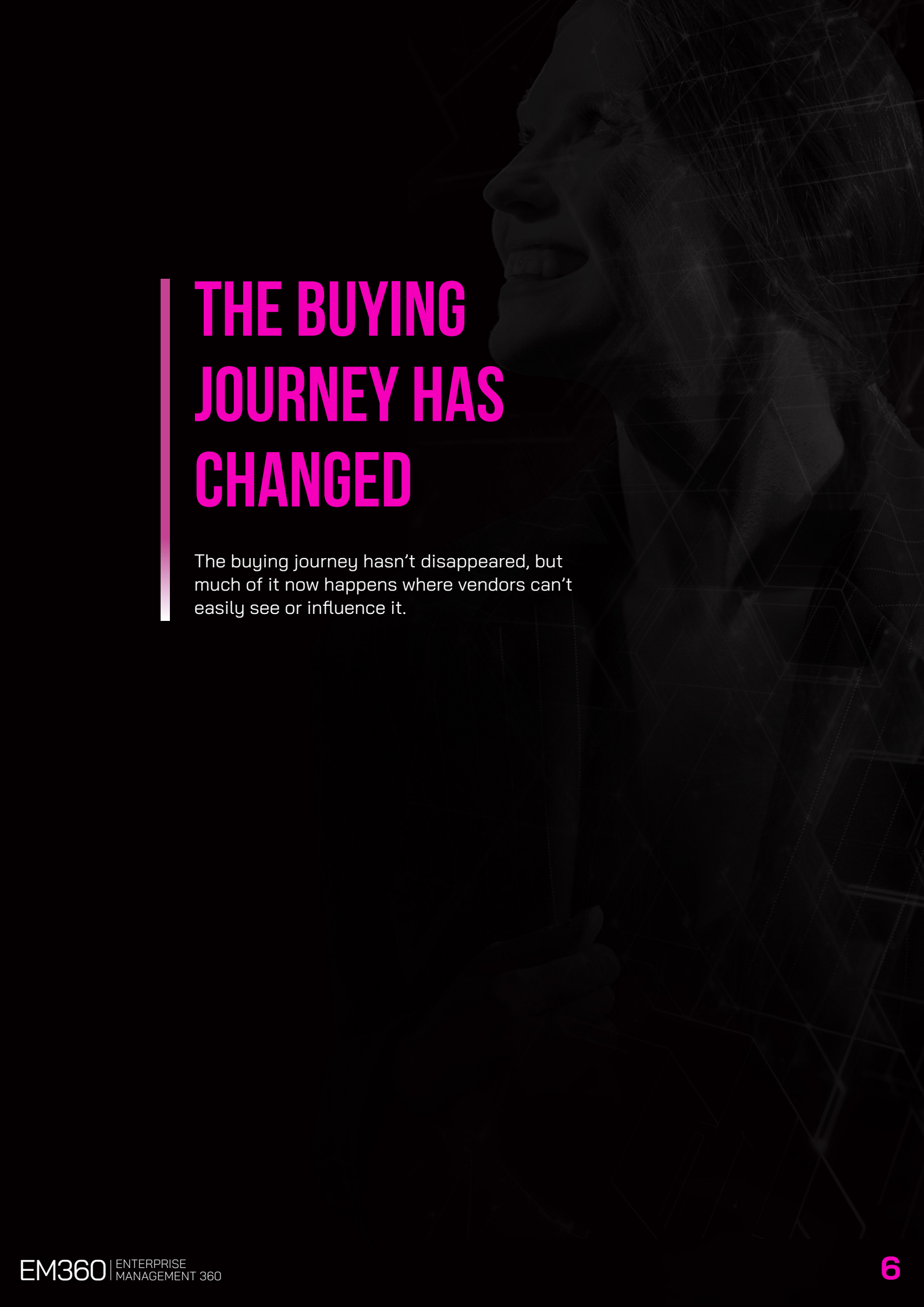
Better content still matters, obviously. But the bigger issue is that enterprise influence now works through a **"trust environment,"** not a funnel diagram.



Marketing is no longer trying to win a single impression battle. It's trying to help a buyer carry a story through a political, financial, operational, and reputational process. Once you see that, a lot of current frustration starts to make sense.

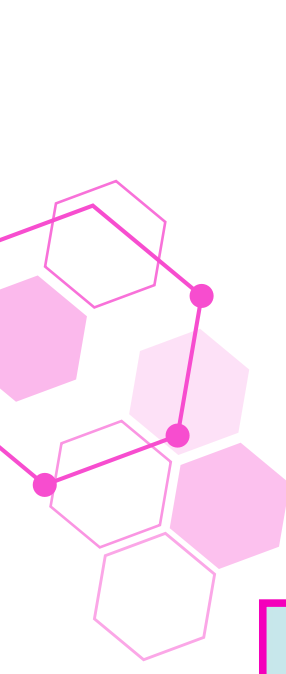
Marketing hasn't become less important. If anything, it has become more commercially central. But its job has moved upstream and downstream at the same time. Upstream, it has to influence belief before measurable intent appears. Downstream, it has to support approval far beyond the point of content engagement. The old comfort was visibility. The new requirement is **transferability** and **defensibility**. That's the **"approval economy."**





THE BUYING JOURNEY HAS CHANGED

The buying journey hasn't disappeared, but much of it now happens where vendors can't easily see or influence it.



For a long time, enterprise marketing operated on a relatively simple assumption: if you could see enough buyer activity, you could understand how decisions were forming. That assumption made sense when most research happened through channels vendors could track.

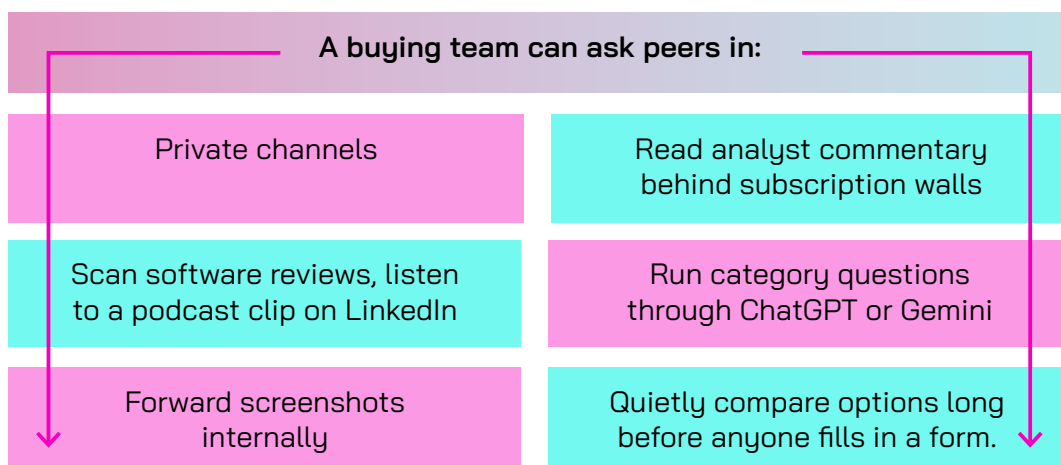
Today, much of the journey happens elsewhere. Buyers explore categories through AI tools, private conversations, analyst research, review platforms, and internal discussions long before they identify themselves. The challenge isn't that buyers have become impossible to reach. It's that influence increasingly forms before intent becomes visible.

Enterprise buyers aren't moving through a neat funnel anymore

The classic funnel assumes something tidy. A buyer notices a problem, consumes content, becomes a lead, talks to sales, compares options, and buys. It isn't a ridiculous model. It's just too clean for the world it's now trying to describe. Enterprise buyers rarely arrive empty-handed anymore.

They arrive with prior impressions, borrowed language, half-formed shortlists, conflicting internal opinions, and increasingly, an AI-assisted reading of the market that may have started before the vendor ever earned a click.

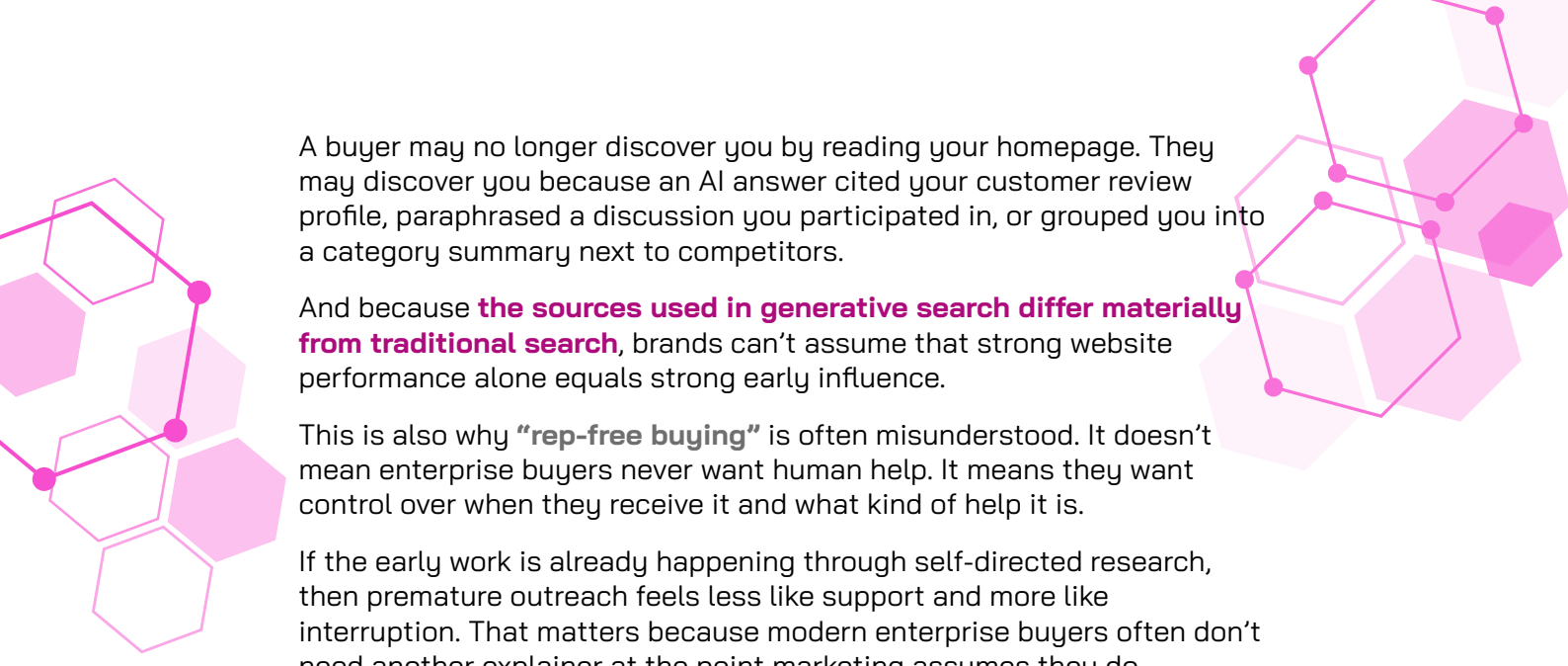
The **"dark funnel"** gets described so often that it can start sounding mystical. It isn't. It's just what happens when people do research outside your measurement stack.



Academic work on **B2B buying dynamics** captures the same basic point from another angle: a **business buyer isn't one actor** but a **set of individuals** with **different information behaviour**, while **the consultations among them are typically invisible to the seller**.

AI search is accelerating this pattern because it compresses early-stage exploration. Search used to push buyers towards a set of links. Now it often gives them a provisional conclusion first.

That changes what **"discovery"** means.



A buyer may no longer discover you by reading your homepage. They may discover you because an AI answer cited your customer review profile, paraphrased a discussion you participated in, or grouped you into a category summary next to competitors.

And because **the sources used in generative search differ materially from traditional search**, brands can't assume that strong website performance alone equals strong early influence.

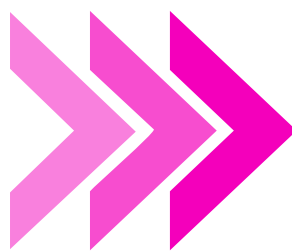
This is also why **"rep-free buying"** is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean enterprise buyers never want human help. It means they want control over when they receive it and what kind of help it is.

If the early work is already happening through self-directed research, then premature outreach feels less like support and more like interruption. That matters because modern enterprise buyers often don't need another explainer at the point marketing assumes they do.

Reuters reported in

**March
2026**

that Trustpilot
experienced a



1,490%

increase in
click-throughs as
AI-generated search
results increasingly
drew on review content.

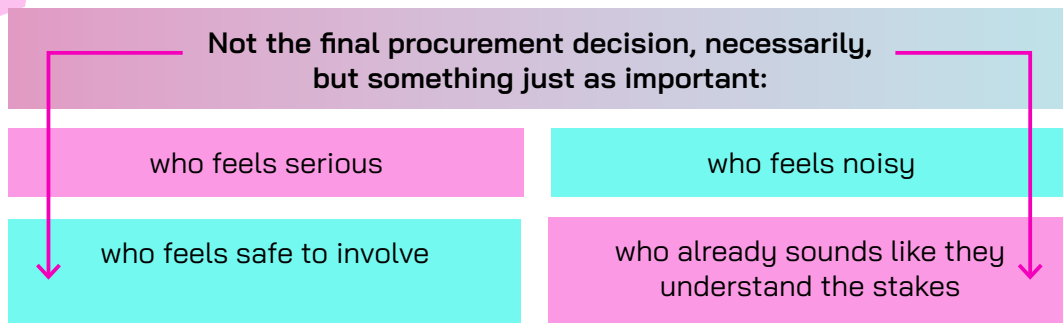
What they need is a sharper way to reduce uncertainty. And review platforms and machine-readable trust signals are becoming part of that self-directed layer. **Reuters** reported in March 2026 that **Trustpilot's click-throughs surged 1,490%** as **AI-generated search results** increasingly **incorporated review data**.



That isn't just a consumer story. It signals a broader structural change. When AI systems build answers from third-party data, the market starts borrowing trust from external validation layers.

Reviews stop being just buyer reassurance on the side. They become part of how machines assemble credibility in the first place.

There's a nasty implication here for intent data. Intent feeds can still be useful. They can signal category activity, comparison behaviour, and timing cues. But they're downstream of a lot of trust formation. By the time an account spikes in your dashboard, something may already have been decided.



Intent data is often measuring visible motion in a decision environment where invisible interpretation started earlier.

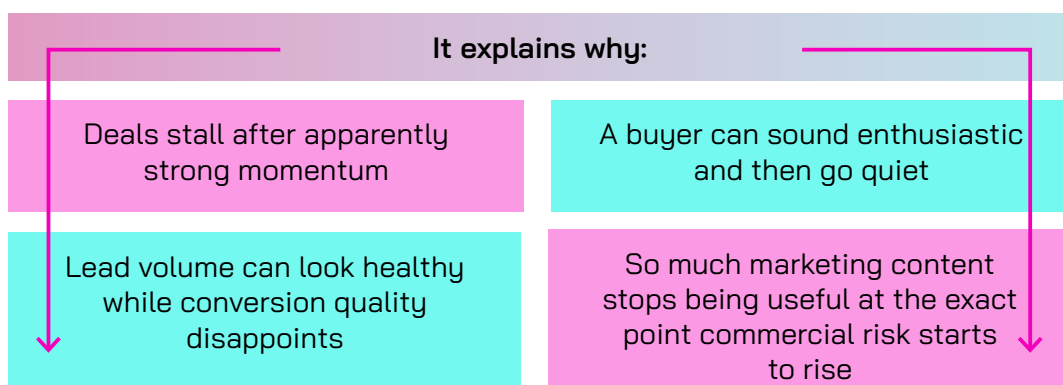
That doesn't mean vendors have lost all influence. It means they can't treat the funnel as the whole decision environment anymore. They're still in the story. They're just no longer the narrator from page one.

The earlier parts of the buying journey have moved into distributed networks of search, conversation, validation, and internal interpretation. Enterprise marketing now has to earn influence in those places too.

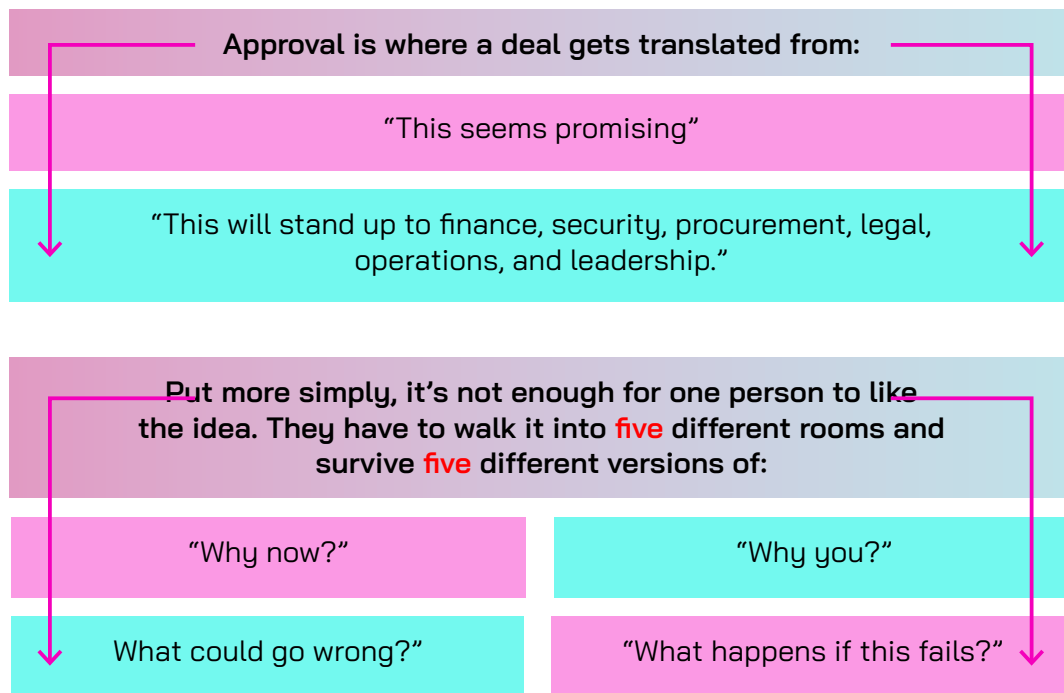
The real bottleneck is approval, not attention

Attention is easier to get than some marketers admit and much less useful than many dashboards imply. A buyer can click an ad, read a report, watch a webinar, register for a roundtable, or spend six minutes on a pricing page and still be nowhere near organisational readiness. Interest isn't the hard part.

The hard part is what happens next, when a person who likes an idea has to take it into rooms full of people who weren't there for the original pitch and don't share the same lens. That's why **"approval"** is the better lens.



That translation work is the real bottleneck.



That's what modern enterprise buying feels like inside a business. It's less like choosing a product from a shelf and more like building a coalition around a change.

Finance pressure makes this especially acute.

The **Teneo Vision 2026 CEO and Investor Outlook Survey** found that **less than half of current AI projects** had **generated returns greater than their costs**, even while **68% of CEOs** at public companies planned to **increase AI spending in 2026**.



According to a 2025 survey by KPMG, 78% of business leaders said they expected measurable returns from AI investments within three years, yet only a minority reported having mature frameworks for tracking AI value creation. So the pressure to invest remains high. But the pressure to prove value is rising even faster.

That combination matters. It tells you organisations are still willing to invest, but they're doing it under sharper questions about payback, timing, and discipline. In that environment, "**interesting**" isn't enough. Buyers need a case that survives scrutiny from leaders who are tired of being sold certainty that later turns into cost.

Procurement pressure doesn't only show up as price negotiation either. It increasingly shows up as supplier-risk logic.

Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply survey reported that **29% of managers** said companies in their **supply chains** had been **attacked in recent months**, pushing cyber resilience higher up the procurement agenda.

Translate that into enterprise technology buying and the implication is obvious – buyers aren't merely weighing value claims. They're assessing whether bringing a vendor in creates new exposure across the supplier ecosystem.

Security and governance concerns widen the approval gap even further. The **World Economic Forum's 2026 Global Risks** survey put **economic confrontation** at the **top of short-term global risks** and raised long-term concern about weak AI governance.

In parallel, finance leaders are being drawn deeper into technology strategy.

Reporting on 2026 finance and tech trends shows **CFOs are increasingly co-architects of AI investment decisions** because costs are becoming more variable, benefits are harder to benchmark upfront, and governance can't be treated as an afterthought.

When buyers bring a proposal into that kind of operating climate, they're not just mapping features to needs. They're mapping consequences to accountability.



"The CFO is becoming one of the most important technology decision-makers in the enterprise." ~ Tom Davenport, Distinguished Professor, Babson College and AI researcher.

This is the part conventional demand language tends to flatten. It talks as if buyers are trying to be persuaded. Very often they're trying to avoid embarrassment, disruption, waste, and second-order problems. They're not buying the most exciting story first. They're buying the story that looks safest to defend.



Behavioural economists call this loss aversion: the tendency for people to weigh potential losses more heavily than equivalent gains. In enterprise buying environments, avoiding a visible mistake often feels more urgent than achieving a potential upside. That doesn't make buyers irrational. It makes them accountable.

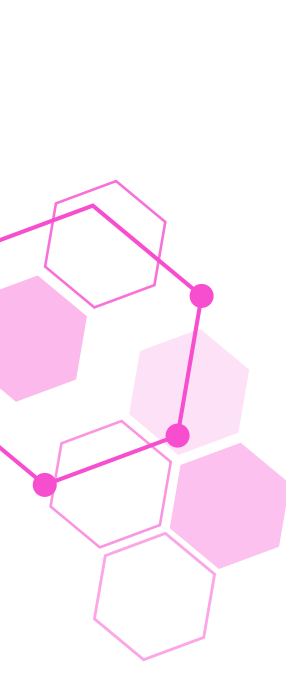
Sometimes that still is the most innovative vendor. But if it is, the vendor has to do the harder work of making the innovation feel governable, understandable, and **low-regret**.

Risk is the new starting point

It's tempting to describe buyers as cautious and leave it there. That's true, but it misses the reason. Enterprise buyers aren't harder to sell to because they became cynical for sport. They're harder to sell to because the blast radius of a bad decision is wider.

A shaky software decision can create rollout delays, adoption failure, budget waste, compliance exposure, supplier headaches, cyber risk, or just one of those quietly career-limiting moments where everybody remembers who championed the thing that went wrong. None of that makes people timid.

It makes them rational.



That's why risk has moved from objection to starting point. In earlier periods, a vendor could often open with upside. Better productivity. Faster teams. More insight. More automation.

Now the buyer's first mental filter is often closer to: what would this expose us to, who would own that exposure, and how much internal resistance would we trigger by introducing it? The path to persuasion increasingly runs through uncertainty reduction. If a brand can't do that, the rest of its message often lands as theatre.

The economics of AI are a good example. Boards and executives are clearly still investing, but even enthusiastic organisations are struggling to measure cost, governance, and return cleanly. That makes buyers more alert to implementation risk and more sensitive to whether a vendor can help model trade-offs honestly.

The safest-looking supplier is often not the one making the loudest claims. It's the one showing where the risks are, how they're bounded, and what evidence exists already. That feels less thrilling on a campaign brief. It feels much better in an approval meeting.



According to a 2025 survey by IBM's Institute for Business Value, only 25% of AI initiatives had delivered the expected return on investment, despite continued enthusiasm and spending across enterprises. So the challenge is no longer convincing organisations to experiment with AI. It's helping them prove value and manage risk at scale.

AI itself adds another twist. Research on **human trust in AI-assisted decision-making** consistently finds that **better outcomes depend on trust being calibrated**, not blindly increased. Studies in 2023 and 2025 show that **human decision quality improves when people understand when to rely on AI** and when to hold back, rather than simply deferring to machine confidence.

That matters for enterprise marketing because buyers are now using AI during research, but they still need confidence in their own judgement and the organisation's oversight. In other words, AI expands the information layer, but it doesn't remove the need for defensible human approval.



"The problem isn't whether machines think but whether men do." ~ B.F. Skinner, Psychologist and author

There's a subtle but important consequence here. When risk becomes the starting point, marketing has to stop treating reassurance as a late-stage add-on. Reassurance is no longer what happens after the product story. It's the product story, at least in practical buying terms.

Buyers want to know whether the thing will work, but also whether the decision can be explained, defended, implemented, and governed. A vendor that only markets upside is effectively asking the buyer to do the risk translation alone. In approval-heavy environments, that's a big ask.

Low-regret decisions now beat exciting but fragile ones more often than some teams realise. That doesn't mean enterprise markets have become anti-innovation. It means innovation has to arrive wrapped in operational logic. The successful vendor isn't necessarily the most conservative one. It's the one that makes progress feel less dangerous.

That's a very different marketing brief from "generate more buzz."

The MQL is measuring interest in a world that runs on confidence

The blunt version is this: most MQL systems still reward visible activity in a market where real progress depends on invisible confidence. A whitepaper download can mean active evaluation, idle curiosity, competitor research, student browsing, or one stakeholder doing early homework with no internal support whatsoever.

A webinar registration can signal urgency, or it can signal that someone had a free hour and a mild problem to understand. When teams treat those actions as if they equal readiness, they don't just inflate reporting. They distort how the business interprets demand.

That's why saying **"the MQL is dead"** is too lazy. The more accurate point is that the meaning of qualification has broken. Qualification used to imply that visible engagement had a tighter relationship with buying progress.

But if the really important work happens in hidden research, internal discussion, and later-stage approval building, then activity scores are standing in for something they can no longer reliably represent. They measure signs of interest in a market that increasingly runs on the buyer's ability to build internal confidence.

AI search makes this mismatch easier to miss. Answer-first systems can reduce click volume even while making buyer evaluation more serious.

Research on
Google AI
Overviews
found

15%



decline in
traffic to
informational
pages...

following the introduction of AI-generated answer experiences in one large study, while another study showed answer summaries alter source exposure and publisher economics materially.

That means lower visible interaction doesn't automatically mean lower influence. Sometimes it means the buyer got enough from the answer layer to move further before clicking.

In pure lead terms, that can look like underperformance. In buying reality, it may mean the evaluation happened elsewhere first.

This is also why intent data often creates **"false optimism"**. Intent provides useful directional signs. But it can't tell you whether the buyer has internal sponsorship, clarity on business impact, alignment among functions, or a path through procurement and security.

It can tell you that an account is researching. It can't tell you whether the decision is becoming easier to approve. Those aren't the same thing. And in complex enterprise sales, the second one matters more.

So what should count as a stronger signal? Not simply more activity. Better evidence of decision quality.

Is the buyer asking questions that imply internal comparison, not just surface education?

Are they pulling in colleagues from finance, operations, or security?

Are they engaging with materials that help defend the change, not just understand the category?

Are they trying to quantify impact, pressure-test rollout, or adapt the story to different functions?

Those are confidence signals, not just attention signals. They're harder to count, which is probably why so many dashboards prefer downloads. Downloads are tidy. Organisational confidence isn't.

This doesn't just affect marketing accuracy. It affects trust between marketing and sales. Sales teams don't distrust MQLs because they hate marketing. They distrust them because too many "qualified" leads fail the first human conversation. That failure isn't always a targeting problem.

Sometimes it's a definition problem. The handoff happens before the account has enough shared confidence to sustain real buying movement. So marketing reports momentum, sales experiences fragility, and both sides end up annoyed for understandable reasons. Corporate harmony, as ever, remains a premium subscription.

The practical answer isn't to throw away scoring. It's to make scoring less obsessed with motion and more sensitive to decision development. Qualification should reflect whether a buying group looks more capable of carrying the decision forward, not just more active on tracked surfaces.

Influence now forms before intent becomes visible

That requires different inputs, different collaboration with sales, and a more honest view of what visible engagement can and can't prove.

By the time a buyer appears in a CRM, something has usually already happened. They've heard a name before. They've absorbed a category frame from somewhere. They've encountered a third-party explanation that made a problem clearer. They've seen a leader, analyst, or practitioner speak in a way that felt credible.

They may not be "in market" in the system yet, but they're already forming a view of which brands feel useful and which feel interchangeable. AI search is now part of that trust system, but not the whole system. The significance isn't just that buyers can ask better questions faster.

It's that AI systems are themselves choosing which sources become legible, citable, and summarised.

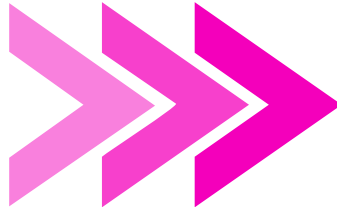
That changes how influence forms. A brand can become present in the buyer's mind without generating a traditional lead because the buyer's first exposure came through an answer layer, a cited review, an external conversation, or an executive clip reused across channels.

In that environment, influence increasingly precedes measurable demand.

Adobe Analytics

53%

have found that



more revenue per
visit's generated by
shoppers referred
from large language
models

That doesn't prove enterprise buyers behave identically, and it shouldn't be stretched that far. But it's a strong directional signal that AI-assisted referrals can be lower in volume and higher in quality.

That's precisely the kind of pattern enterprise marketers should expect: fewer obvious clicks, more pre-qualified expectations.

Third-party systems are becoming part of that early influence stack too. Trustpilot's surge in AI-era traffic shows how review ecosystems are being pulled into machine-mediated discovery.

LinkedIn's creator and publisher push shows how professional audiences are consuming more authority through people and media formats, not just company posts.

And studies of AI search show that source selection is less stable and less directly tied to old organic ranking than many web teams assume.

Put together, that means influence now forms in a hybrid environment of

Human conversation

Publisher logic, platform incentives,
and machine synthesis

Vendors are one voice inside that system, not the system itself.

This creates a measurement challenge, but also a strategic opening. If influence precedes intent, then the job isn't merely to detect demand faster. It's to become easier to trust before demand becomes measurable.

That points marketers towards different kinds of investments: expert media, analyst interpretation, review integrity, executive visibility, problem-led explanation, and content designed to travel well through AI and peer ecosystems.

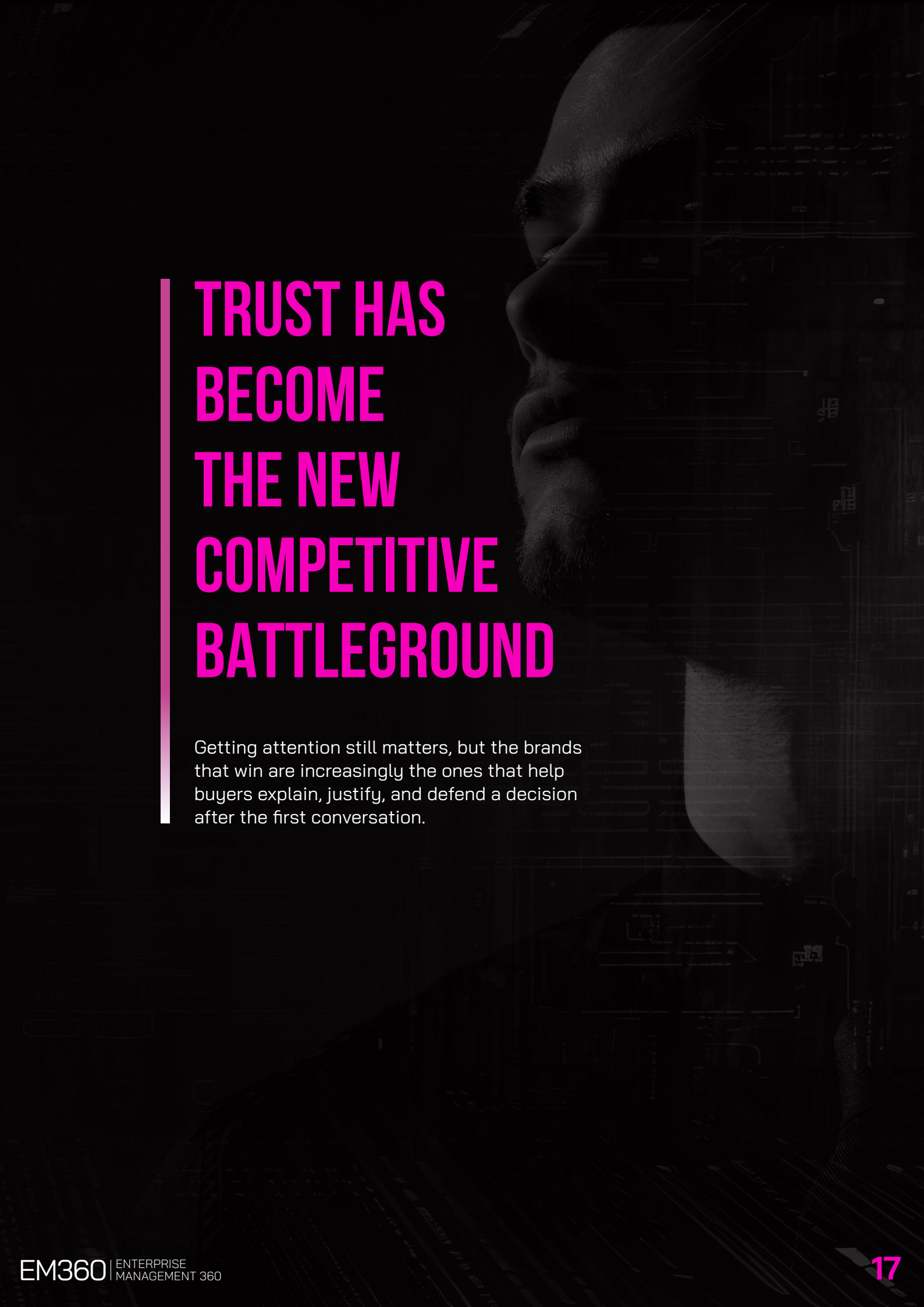
In old funnel language, these can look indirect. In "approval-economy" language, they're part of the demand formation layer itself. It also means

marketers should be very careful about treating dark funnel as a blind spot they need to eliminate. Some of it can't be eliminated. Nor should it be.

Buyers will always discuss options privately. Committees will always debate out of frame. AI tools will always answer some questions before your site gets a visit. The smarter response isn't to chase perfect visibility.

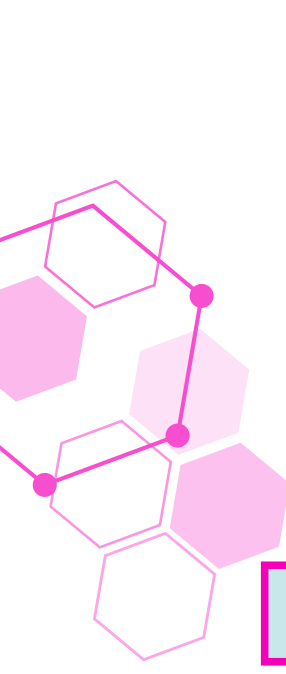
It's to build enough distributed credibility that when those invisible moments happen, your brand already feels easier to keep in the conversation.





TRUST HAS BECOME THE NEW COMPETITIVE BATTLEGROUND

Getting attention still matters, but the brands that win are increasingly the ones that help buyers explain, justify, and defend a decision after the first conversation.



Most content strategies were built around discovery. The goal was to help buyers find a problem, understand it, and engage with a solution. That work still matters, but it no longer reflects the whole buying process.

As enterprise decisions become more complex and approval-driven, content has taken on a second responsibility. It doesn't just have to create interest. It has to help buyers carry a decision through scrutiny, questions, objections, and organisational debate. The distinction sounds subtle. Commercially, it changes almost everything.

Content has split into two jobs

One of the clearest consequences of the approval economy is that content now has two separate jobs.

The first job is to earn attention. It helps buyers recognise a problem, understand a category, and decide which vendors or ideas deserve more time.

The second job is to help the buyer get approval. It helps them justify timing, reduce perceived risk, prepare for objections, and explain the decision across the organisation.

Those jobs overlap sometimes, but they're not the same. Treating them as the same is one of the quiet reasons content programmes underperform commercially.

Discovery content still matters. A sharp article, podcast, video clip, or report can give a buyer language for a problem they haven't fully named yet.

That may mean ROI logic, rollout sequencing, technical validation, peer proof, stakeholder-specific arguments, or third-party evidence that feels safer than a vendor claim on its own.



Research from Gartner found that B2B buyers spend only a small portion of their buying journey meeting with potential suppliers directly. Much more time is spent researching independently and discussing options internally. The implication is simple: buyers need content that helps them make decisions when vendors aren't in the room.

AI search makes this split more pronounced. If answer layers and AI summaries increasingly handle fast factual orientation, then brands have less advantage in producing competent generic explainers at scale.

Competent generic content is becoming cheap.

What retains value is content that helps a buyer do harder human work: align stakeholders, compare trade-offs, handle disagreement, and make the recommendation easier to defend.

Ironically, the more efficient discovery becomes, the more important approval-oriented material becomes.

This has a practical effect on format choice.

A podcast clip may create salience. A category article may frame the market. A long-form report may help shape senior thinking. A one-page business case template may help with finance. A technical FAQ may help security. A customer panel may reassure operations. A peer review profile may reduce perceived supplier risk.

None of those formats is “the content strategy”. They’re different assets serving different stages of decision development. Marketing gets into trouble when it optimises the first set because those metrics are cleaner and then assumes the second set will take care of itself. It usually doesn’t.

There is also a straightforward sales implication. Sales enablement and buyer enablement are often treated as adjacent but separate disciplines. In the approval economy they blur together. The same material that helps a seller handle objection often needs to help the buyer handle internal objection without the seller present.

That means content strategy can’t end at **“what gets the meeting?”** It has to ask **“what helps the meeting survive after we leave?”**



*“Your customer rarely makes decisions alone.” ~ Matt Dixon,
Founding Partner, DCM Insights and co-author of The
Challenger Sale*

Credibility works best when the vendor stops controlling everything

Buyers don’t suddenly become naive the moment a logo appears on a page. They understand commercial intent. Sponsorship isn’t the problem. The problem is **“over-control”**.

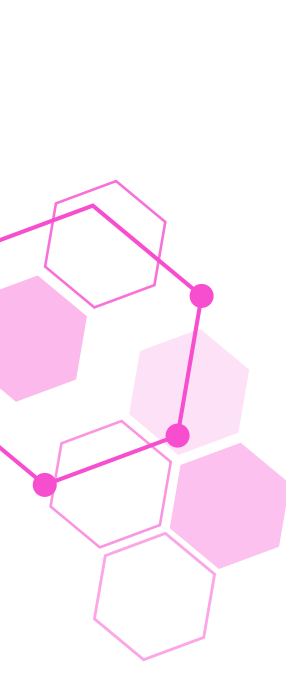
The moment content feels too neat, too vendor-centred, too eager to guide the reader to the approved conclusion, credibility starts leaking out of the room.

Buyers can feel when a problem has been framed just a little too conveniently around the sponsor’s solution. That creates resistance, not because buyers are hostile, but because they interpret over-control as a risk signal.

This is why moderated conversations, analyst-led interviews, expert podcasts, and external commentary often outperform polished brand exposition when trust is fragile. They create room for buyers to think.

They delay the sales conclusion long enough for the audience to decide whether the speaker actually understands the pressure around the decision. That room matters. In complex purchases, trust rarely forms because the vendor said “trust us” with better wording or funky graphics.

It forms because the buyer concludes the vendor seems to understand the problem honestly, including the hard parts.



AI is reinforcing the value of external credibility in a slightly unexpected way. Reuters reported that **Trustpilot emerged as an AI winner** partly because **LLM-driven experiences increasingly use review material** as source input.

In other words, third-party validation is no longer only a human reassurance layer. It's also becoming a "machine-readable credibility layer". That raises the value of review quality, analyst visibility, external mentions, and expert conversations that can be cited, summarised, and surfaced outside the vendor's own site.

The strategic mistake many brands still make is assuming control equals consistency, and consistency equals trust. In reality, too much control can flatten a message until it no longer sounds believable. Buyers don't want chaos, but they do want signs of independent thought.

A useful moderated conversation where a difficult question is answered plainly can travel further than a perfectly aligned corporate script, because it feels harder to fake and easier to believe.



Research in behavioural psychology consistently finds that people often judge information as more credible when it includes nuance, limitations, or acknowledgement of uncertainty. Paradoxically, admitting complexity can increase trust because it signals honesty rather than persuasion.

For enterprise marketing, that has a direct implication. You don't build trust only by speaking more clearly about yourself. You also build it by creating environments where other credible voices can interpret the problem, test the assumptions, and make your position feel earned rather than pre-written.

That isn't a soft branding exercise. In approval-heavy markets, it's part of how commercial defensibility gets built.

Expertise isn't enough. Perspective is what travels.

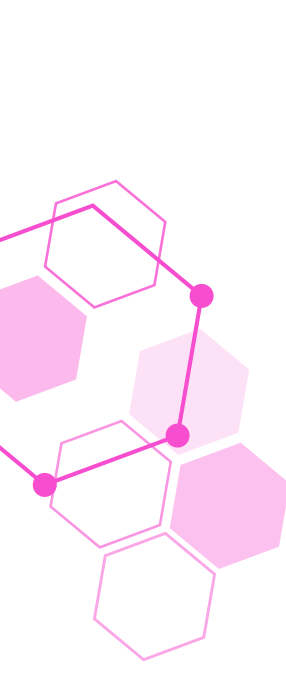
Most enterprise companies aren't short on expertise. They're full of people who know the product, the infrastructure, the workflows, the implementation headaches, the edge cases, and the competitive landscape in painful detail.

The problem is that expertise alone doesn't necessarily travel.

It tells the buyer what you know. It doesn't automatically tell them why your way of seeing the market helps them make a better decision. That's the difference between subject matter expertise and authority.

Perspective is what travels because perspective organises complexity. It helps the buyer understand what matters, what's changing, which trade-offs are real, and how to think about the pressure they're under.

That has much more influence on category choice than simply demonstrating deep product knowledge.



In practical terms, buyers are less desperate for another expert who can explain features. They're more desperate for someone who can explain the decision around those features.

This is also why executive visibility matters more than many content programmes admit. LinkedIn's June 2026 push into BrandWorks, Top Voices 360, and BrandLink isn't just an ad story. It's a signal that B2B influence is increasingly being routed through recognisable people, creator trust, and media-like environments.

Reuters reported that **\$20M+** was generated by **LinkedIn's Top Voices 360 programme** between May 2025 and May 2026 while **BrandLink revenue was expected to nearly triple**. That's what platforms build when they believe buyers value person-led authority, not just brand publishing volume.

A visible perspective does two things at once. It differentiates the brand before product comparison gets detailed, and it gives internal champions language they can reuse. That second effect matters more. Thought leadership isn't really doing its job when people say "that was smart."

It's doing its job when people say "that helps me explain what's going on in my business." Perspective is the bridge between abstract expertise and decision usefulness.

Human-led content matters more because generic content is becoming cheap

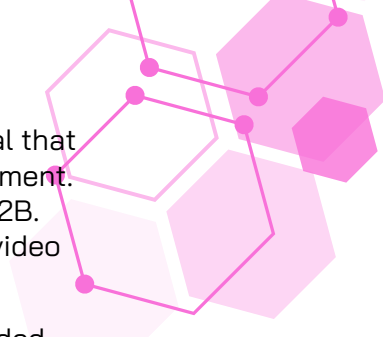
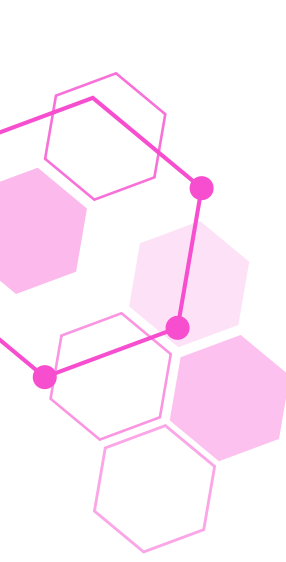
This isn't an "AI bad, humans good" argument. AI is already changing how content teams work, and it will continue to do so. The more honest point is narrower: AI has made competent content easier to produce, but it hasn't made trust easier to earn. In markets flooded with clean, reasonable, highly similar outputs, the scarce thing is no longer draft generation.

It's identifiable judgement. That's why buyers are increasingly drawn to signals that are harder to automate. Real disagreement. Lived experience. Accountable explanation. A visible face attached to a point of view.

The **Financial Times** reported in 2025 that **CEO posts on LinkedIn** had **risen** markedly and that **video was growing faster than other formats**, while Reuters later reported **CEO video posts were up 68% over two years**. Those shifts aren't happening because executives suddenly fell in love with ring lights.

They're happening because audiences are using human presence as a shortcut for seriousness and accountability. There's also a trust asymmetry at work. Generic AI can produce plausible language very cheaply. Because buyers know that, polished generic language becomes less differentiating.

The more content feels like it could have been assembled by anyone, the more buyers start scanning for the cues that suggest someone actually stands behind it. In a strange way, AI abundance increases the value of recognisable humanity.



Not sentimentality. Not personal branding fluff. Just the plain signal that a real person with some skin in the game is making an actual judgement. This is one reason podcasts and video are expanding their role in B2B. A decent written article can tell you what someone thinks. A good video conversation lets you assess how they think.

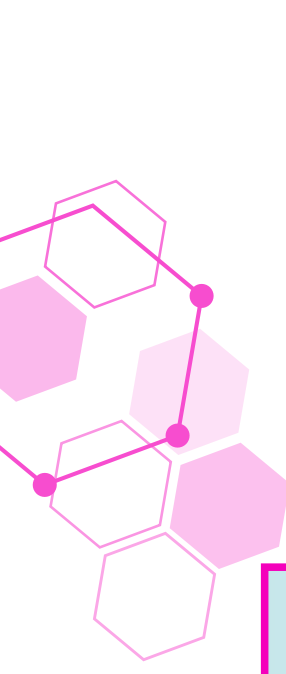
You can hear whether the answer is scripted, evasive, useful, grounded, or genuinely responsive. That makes it a strong trust format in a rep-free, self-directed buying environment. It isn't replacing every other asset. But it's doing a better job in situations where buyers are assessing not just information, but **credibility**.





MARKETING'S ROLE IS BEING REDEFINED

Enterprise marketing's value increasingly depends on whether buyers can carry the story through the organisation after the vendor leaves the room.



For years, marketing and sales have been measured around moments of engagement. The click, the registration, the meeting, the opportunity. Those moments still matter, but they don't tell us much about what happens next.

The harder challenge begins after the conversation. Enterprise decisions move through organisations one explanation at a time, and every retelling creates an opportunity for momentum to build or disappear. That changes how we think about influence, value propositions, and the role marketing plays in helping deals move forward.

The story has to survive without the vendor in the room

A deal doesn't stall simply because the buyer lost interest. Often it stalls because the buyer could not carry the story forward well enough. This is the forgotten middle of enterprise buying. The vendor may have had a strong meeting. The main contact may genuinely want to move.

But then the conversation leaves the room, enters the business, and gets translated badly.

Suddenly the value isn't clear to finance.

The timeline feels messy to operations.

Security sees unknowns.

Procurement hears risk. Legal sees work.

Leadership sees another proposal competing for budget.

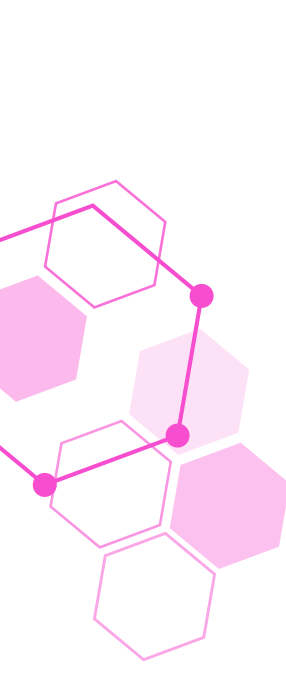
The original case weakens because the story couldn't survive retelling. That's why **"narrative transfer"** matters. A good enterprise story isn't just persuasive when the vendor tells it. It's retellable by the buyer under pressure. It gives the internal champion enough structure to explain the decision in different languages without losing the core logic.

For finance, that might sound like cost control and payback confidence. For security, bounded exposure and governance. For operations, rollout realism. For leadership, strategic fit and timing. Same decision. Different retelling.

The academic evidence on B2B decision processes is telling here. Sellers may see behavioural logs from individuals, but **the consultations that actually shape the purchase happen elsewhere**. Internal stakeholder conversations remain largely invisible.



Research into organisational decision-making consistently finds that information changes as it moves through groups. Each retelling tends to simplify, reframe, or emphasise different aspects depending on the audience.



That means vendors should stop assuming closed-won or closed-lost outcomes are mainly determined by what happened in measurable touchpoints. Often they're determined by how well the buyer was able to reconstruct the case inside a context the vendor never saw.

This is one of the most commercially important implications of the approval economy because it connects thought leadership directly to sales acceleration. Enterprise deals don't move faster just because a brand has a clever message.

They move faster when the buyer has easy-to-use reasoning, evidence, and language for the people they need to convince next. That's a marketing job as much as a sales job. Maybe more, in some organisations, because marketing is better placed to create reusable narrative infrastructure instead of one-off pitch adaptation.

The strongest value proposition in this environment is often the one that compresses retelling effort. If the buyer can say, in plain terms, what the problem is, what the risk of inaction is, what changes operationally, why the supplier is credible, and what evidence supports the move, then the deal has momentum.

If they can't, the organisation does what organisations do when uncertain: it slows down, asks for more proof, and postpones commitment until the energy drains out of the room.

The new role of enterprise marketing is decision enablement

This is where everything comes together. Enterprise marketing still has to generate awareness, shape perception, and create demand. None of that disappears. But it's no longer enough to define marketing success by traffic, engagement, MQLs, and top-of-funnel efficiency if those measures say little about whether buyers can carry a decision through the business.

The emerging job is bigger and more precise than lead generation. **It's decision enablement.** Decision enablement means helping buyers do seven things well:

1. understand the problem,

2. make the risk legible,

3. compare options with less noise,

4. validate claims through credible third parties,

5. align stakeholders internally,

6. defend the decision financially and operationally,

7. and keep the story coherent after the vendor leaves the room.

That's a much more demanding job than producing more assets. But it's also much closer to revenue reality.

Seen through this lens, the parts of enterprise marketing that sometimes get treated as “brand” or “thought leadership” extras start to look a lot more operational.

Analyst-led conversations matter because they create third-party interpretation.

Podcasts matter because they let buyers assess how people think.

Reviews matter because machines and humans both use them as trust cues.

Executive visibility matters because authority increasingly travels through recognisable people.

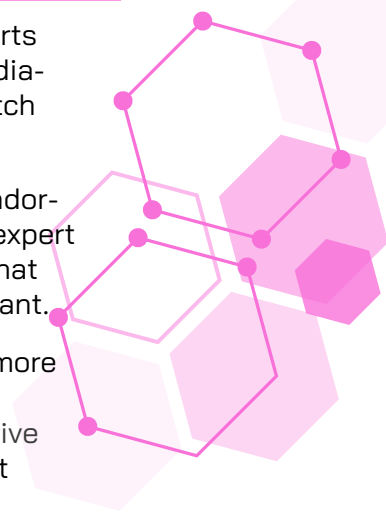
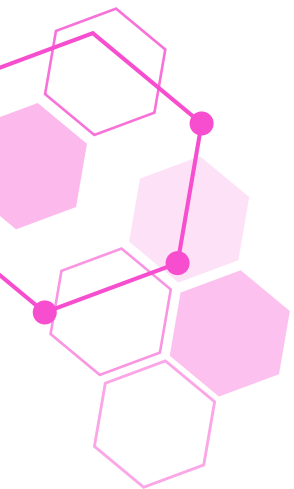
Tele-verified lead generation matters because intent alone is weak unless it connects to a real buying conversation.

None of those are side projects in an approval economy. They're parts of the influence infrastructure. This is also where the value of a media-and-analyst-led model becomes clearer without needing a sales pitch stitched onto the end of the report.

If enterprise influence forms before intent is visible and outside vendor-controlled channels, then trusted media environments, moderated expert conversations, third-party credibility, and buyer-facing narratives that can be reused across the organisation become strategically important.

They don't replace direct demand work. They make direct demand more likely to arrive with actual commercial substance attached to it. In other words, the new role of enterprise marketing isn't simply to “drive pipeline”. It's to improve the quality of decisions the pipeline is built from.

That's a higher bar, but it's also a more defensible one. In a noisy market, the brands that win won't just be the ones that are better known. They'll be the ones whose buyers look more prepared, more aligned, and easier to say yes to.





OPERATING IN THE APPROVAL ECONOMY

The question for marketing leaders is no longer whether buying behaviour has changed, but how quickly they're willing to adapt to it.

Most shifts in marketing create a temptation to chase new tactics. New channels. New tools. New metrics. But the approval economy isn't really a tactical change. It's a change in how enterprise decisions form.

That means the response can't simply be more activity. It has to be a rethink of what marketing is actually trying to help buyers accomplish. The organisations that adapt fastest won't necessarily be the ones producing the most content. They'll be the ones making decisions easier to understand, justify, and carry forward.

What marketing leaders should do next

If the approval economy is the real shift, then the response can't be **"make more content and tighten lead scoring."** That's working harder inside the old model. What leaders need is a calmer, more structural response.

The goal isn't to panic about dark funnel behaviour or declare every old metric obsolete by breakfast. It's to redesign marketing around how enterprise decisions now form and survive.

The most practical response starts with seven moves.

1. First, stop treating engagement as proof of readiness.

Keep measuring content performance and account activity, but stop letting those proxies stand in for buying confidence. Separate curiosity signals from decision signals. Ask sales and marketing to define what evidence suggests a buyer can actually move a decision through internal scrutiny. That might include cross-functional participation, proof requests tied to implementation, finance-oriented questions, or stakeholder-specific follow-ups.

2. Second, build explicitly for approval, not only discovery.

Audit the content library and ask a blunt question: which assets help a buyer win budget, answer security concerns, reassure procurement, or explain the risk of waiting? Most organisations will find they have a lot of category education and not enough decision support. Fixing that gap often improves pipeline quality more than publishing yet another top-of-funnel explainer.



Research from Gartner has found that buyers often report being overwhelmed by the volume of information available during enterprise purchases. The challenge isn't access to information. It's finding information that helps them make and defend a decision.

3. Third, make risk explicit before buyers have to ask.

Don't hide implementation constraints, governance considerations, supplier-risk concerns, or trade-offs until late-stage sales. That information is part of why buyers trust a brand in the first place. Risk clarity isn't the thing you save for objections. It's the thing that reduces them.

4. Fourth, use third-party voices on purpose.

Give buyers places to hear credible interpretation that isn't trapped inside vendor copy. That means analyst moderation, customer voices, practitioner interviews, and media environments where the sponsor is present but not steering every sentence. In an approval economy, externally validated understanding is often more commercially useful than internally polished certainty.

5. Fifth, turn expertise into perspective.

Don't just put subject matter experts on a webinar because they know the product. Help them articulate a market point of view that explains the buyer's pressure, not only the vendor's capability. The people who shape enterprise demand are often the ones who can explain the decision climate around a category, not just the category itself.



"Insight is the ability to decide what matters." ~ Clay Christensen, Professor, Harvard Business School

6. Sixth, create stories that buyers can retell internally.

Build messaging in layers that map to finance, security, procurement, operations, and leadership. Make your best claims portable. If your value proposition only works when your salesperson is there to clarify it, it isn't strong enough for a committee sale.

7. Seventh, treat AI search as part of the trust environment, not the whole strategy.

Make content more machine-readable, yes. Pay attention to review surfaces, expert citations, and structured clarity, yes. But don't confuse answer-engine visibility with buyer confidence. AI can redirect discovery and shape early framing, yet the final enterprise decision still moves through human approval, organisational politics, and risk judgement. Optimise for both machine legibility and human defensibility.

There's also a measurement change hidden inside all this. Marketing leaders should start tracking influence quality, not just lead volume. That means asking questions like:

Are more late-stage opportunities arriving with clearer internal use cases?

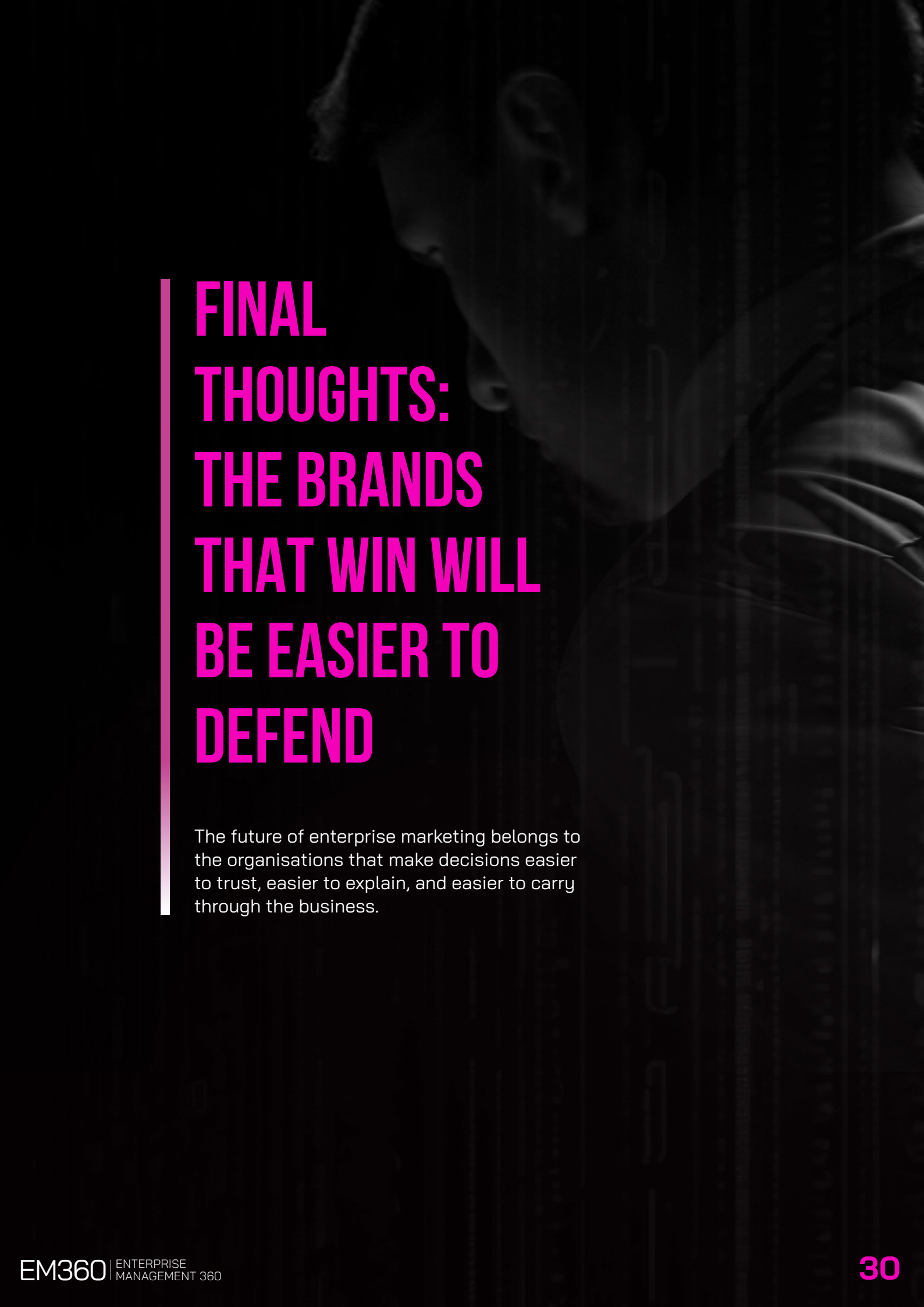
Are sales conversations starting further forward?

Are buyers referencing third-party content or expert conversations before first contact?

Are cross-functional stakeholders entering deals earlier?

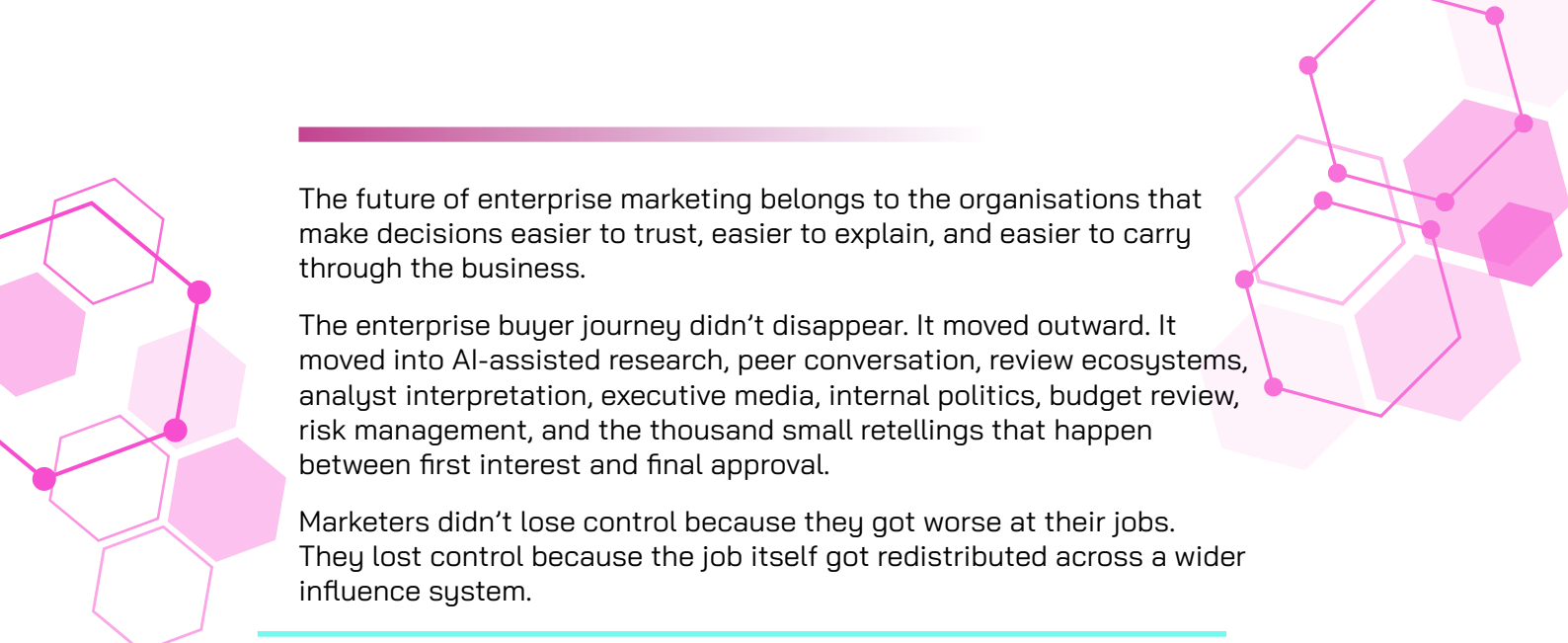
Are more late-stage opportunities arriving with clearer internal use cases?

Those indicators are messier than CPL. They're also closer to revenue truth.



FINAL THOUGHTS: THE BRANDS THAT WIN WILL BE EASIER TO DEFEND

The future of enterprise marketing belongs to the organisations that make decisions easier to trust, easier to explain, and easier to carry through the business.



The future of enterprise marketing belongs to the organisations that make decisions easier to trust, easier to explain, and easier to carry through the business.

The enterprise buyer journey didn't disappear. It moved outward. It moved into AI-assisted research, peer conversation, review ecosystems, analyst interpretation, executive media, internal politics, budget review, risk management, and the thousand small retellings that happen between first interest and final approval.

Marketers didn't lose control because they got worse at their jobs. They lost control because the job itself got redistributed across a wider influence system.



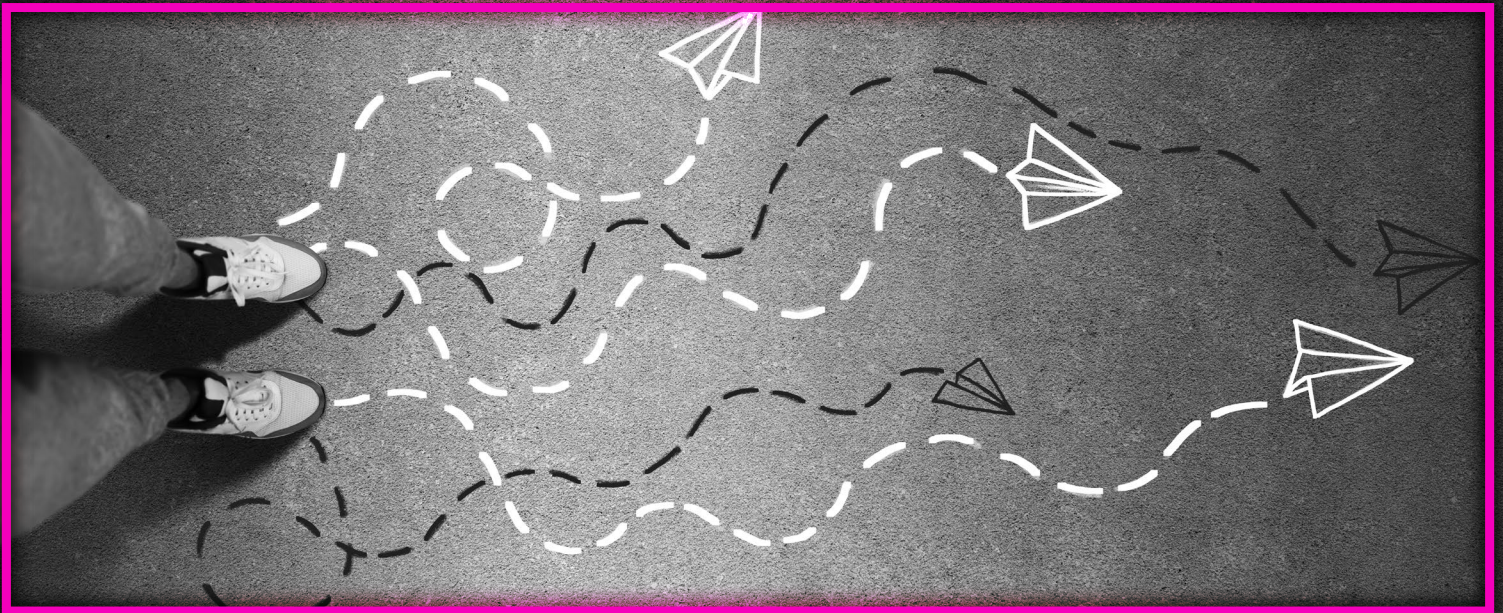
*"The customer's perception is your reality." ~ Kate Zabriskie,
Author and customer experience consultant*

That wider system changes what winning looks like. The future will not belong to the brands that create the most noise or publish the most decent-looking copy. It will belong to the brands that make difficult decisions easier to understand, easier to trust, and easier to carry through the business.

In practical terms, that means making risk clearer, proof stronger, stories more retellable, and credibility less dependent on self-description.

The approval economy isn't a temporary mood swing. It's what enterprise buying looks like when information is abundant, AI compresses research, committees expand accountability, and reputation is assembled from many sources at once. The smart response isn't to chase every new signal harder.

It's to become the brand that feels safest and easiest to endorse when the real discussion happens elsewhere. If enterprise marketing learns to do that, it won't have lost the buying journey at all. It will have caught up with where the journey actually is.



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