

Generative Engine Optimization

The new front door to consumer discovery

Executive briefing for retail, consumer goods and private equity | September 2026



AI answers are becoming the first shelf, salesperson, and path to checkout

39%

of U.S. consumers surveyed had used AI for online shopping

393%

YoY growth in AI traffic to U.S. retail sites in Q1 2026

13×

YoY growth in orders from AI-powered search to Shopify stores, Q1 2026

1

Discovery share is shifting

A brand can win traditional search yet disappear from the AI-generated shortlist.

2

Representation is now a managed asset

Mentions, attributes, sentiment, citations and merchant selection all affect commercial outcomes.

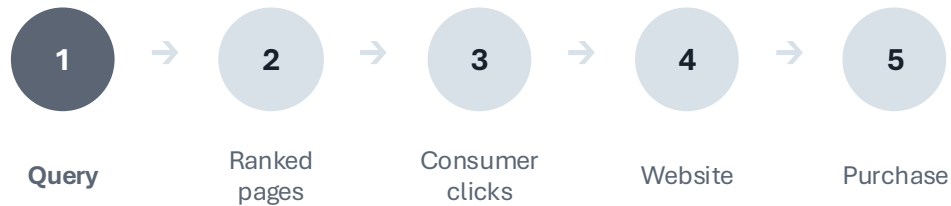
3

The destination is transaction

Protocols and embedded checkout are compressing research, recommendation and purchase.

The consumer journey is compressing from ten links to one synthesized recommendation

TRADITIONAL SEARCH



The strategic shift

From optimizing a click path...

The AI can determine whether the brand appears, what it is known for, which competitors frame the choice, and whether the consumer ever visits the site.

AI-MEDIATED DISCOVERY



...to influencing the answer itself.

GEO manages whether, how, and why a brand appears in AI-generated discovery

GEO

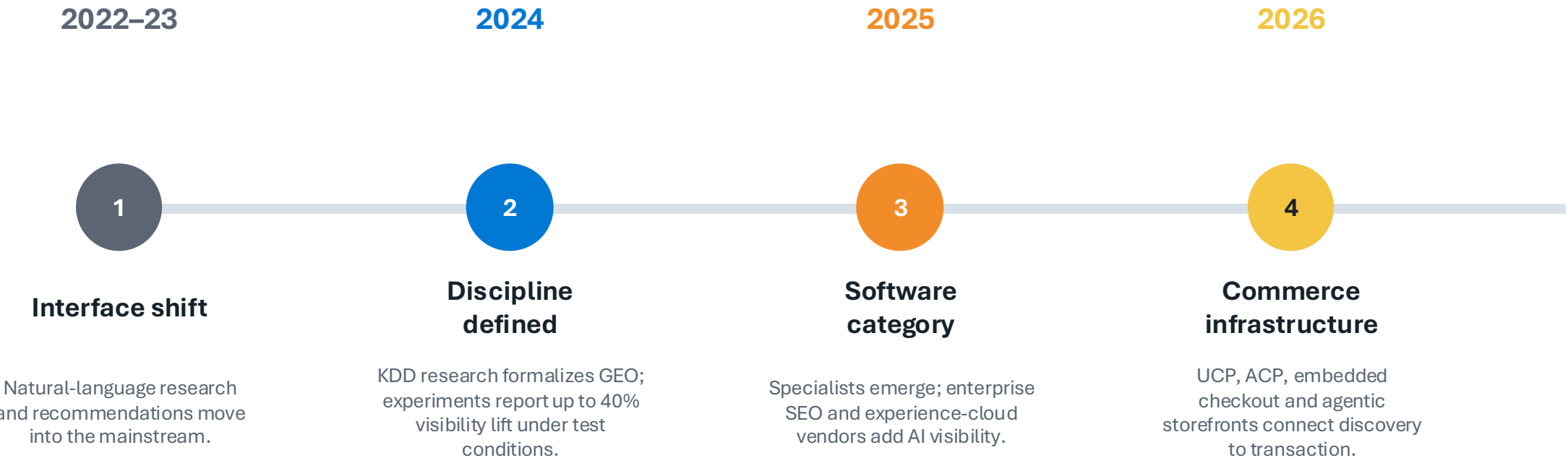
Generative Engine Optimization

The discipline of improving how a brand, product and its evidence are discovered, interpreted, cited and recommended by generative AI systems.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Appear
Is the brand in the answer? | 2 | Compete
Who appears beside it? |
| 3 | Describe
Which attributes are attached? | 4 | Cite
What evidence supports it? |
| 5 | Position
Is the mention prominent? | 6 | Represent
Is sentiment accurate? |
| 7 | Convert
Does visibility create value? | | |

Executive definition GEO = managing a brand's visibility and representation in AI-generated discovery and recommendation experiences.

GEO moved from research concept to commerce infrastructure in four years



Non-deterministic by design

Models, retrieval systems, prompts, sources and outputs continue to change—measurement must be continuous.

AI-referred retail traffic is scaling rapidly, while total share remains early

Retail referral growth

35×

AI-source visits to U.S. retail sites, Jul 2024 → May 2025

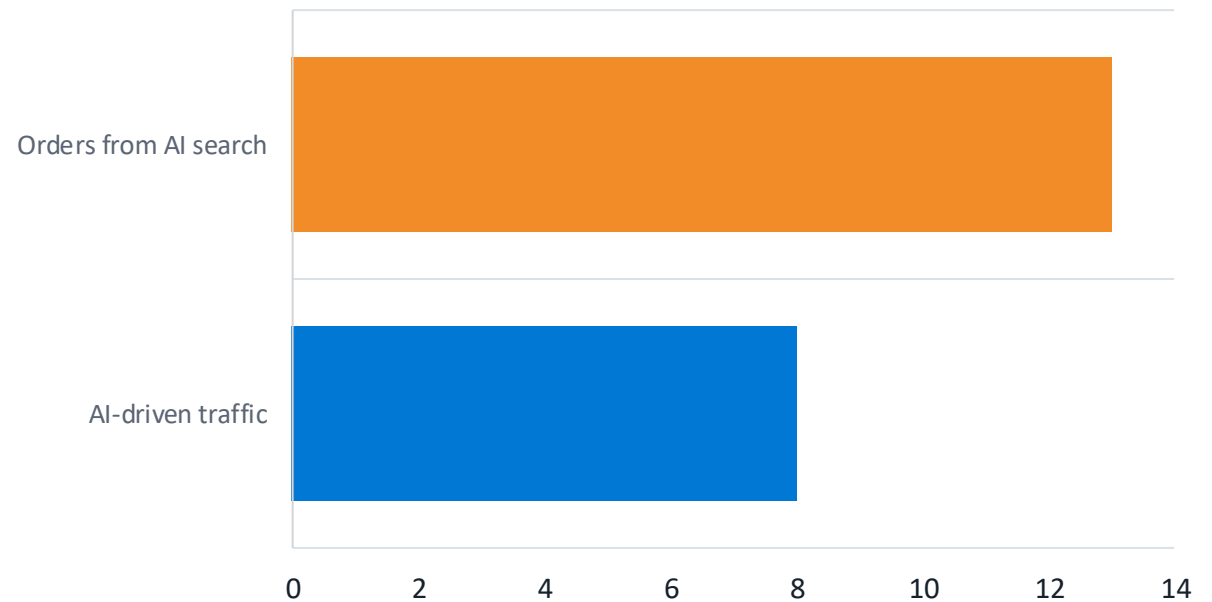
393%

YoY AI traffic growth in Q1 2026

Scale caveat

Across 50,000+ sites, Semrush estimated AI at <0.15% of total web visits in 2025—even as it grew faster than every other channel.

Shopify stores, Q1 2026 (YoY multiple)



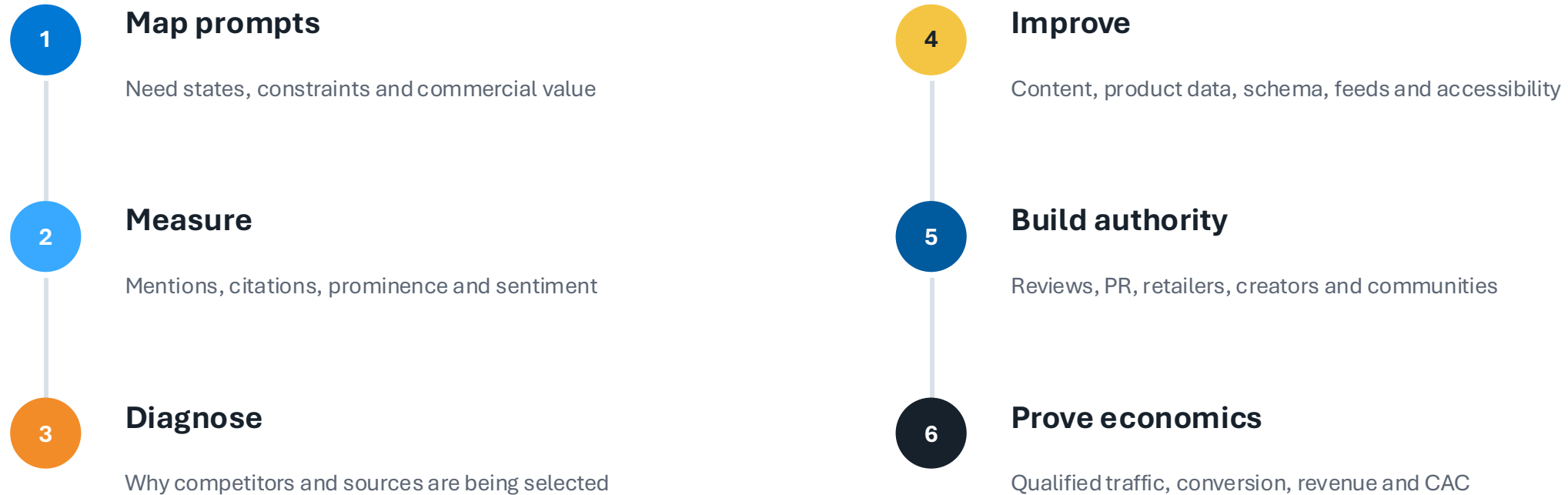
New buyers ordered through AI channels at nearly 2× the rate of other channels (Shopify-reported).

GEO extends SEO; it does not replace it

Dimension	SEO	GEO
Primary unit	Keyword / query	Prompt / need state
Output	Ranked links	Synthesized answer
Win condition	High rank + click	Mention + citation + recommendation
Evidence base	Mostly webpages and links	Owned + retail + editorial + reviews + communities + feeds
Volatility	Algorithmic, observable over time	Model, retrieval and prompt dependent
Core metrics	Rank, CTR, traffic	Visibility, prominence, sentiment, citations, revenue
Operating model	SEO-led	Cross-functional AI discovery owner

One integrated system: SEO creates durable discoverability; GEO ensures that discoverability survives synthesis.

A mature GEO program runs a six-stage closed loop



The loop resets as prompts, engines, products and commercial priorities change.

The evidence ecosystem—not just the brand website—shapes the answer



The AI assembles a representation from corroborating signals. Consistency and authority across the ecosystem matter more than self-assertion alone.

Product information is now a growth asset

A product page must answer the machine’s comparison questions explicitly

1	Identity	What is it? Variant, category, identifiers
2	Fit	Who is it for? Need state, use case, compatibility
3	Proof	Why trust it? Reviews, certifications, expert evidence
4	Economics	Price, promotion, shipping, returns, availability
5	Structure	Schema, feeds, internal links, crawler access
6	Freshness	Current inventory, launch, seasonality, recall status

Machine-readable
commercial asset

1T+

U.S. retail visits in Adobe’s
underlying dataset

85%

of surveyed AI-shopping users said
it improved the experience
Readability gaps can suppress discovery
before merchandising or media has a
chance to work.

Different engines retrieve and cite differently, so one-size-fits-all optimization fails

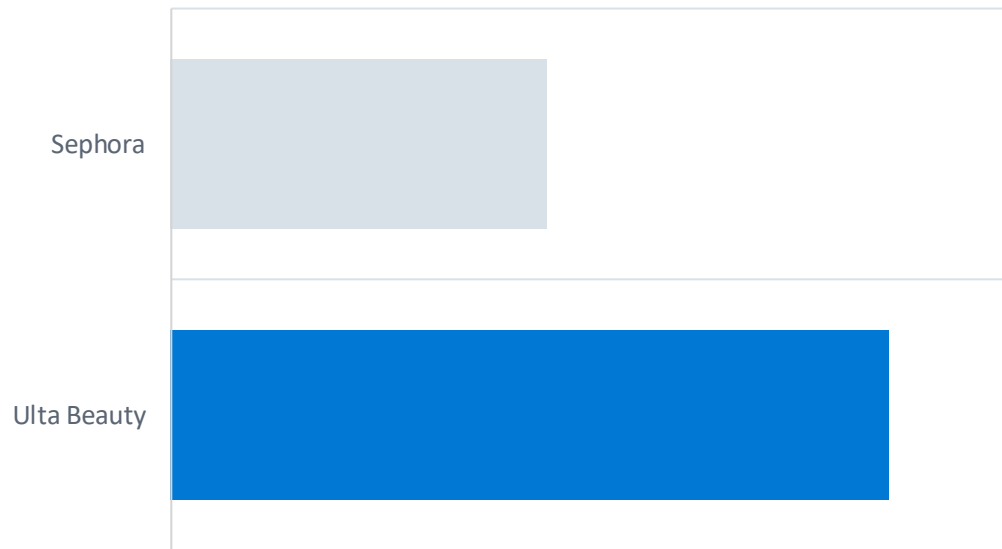
Surface	Typical discovery role	What to monitor
ChatGPT	Conversational research + shopping	Mentions, product eligibility, citations, checkout
Google AI Mode / Overviews	Search-native synthesis + Shopping Graph	AIO presence, merchant data, citations, cart
Gemini	Assistant + Google ecosystem	Brand representation, product data, cross-surface discovery
Perplexity	Research with dense citations + Instant Buy	Citation share, merchant compatibility, sentiment
Microsoft Copilot	Work/web assistant + commerce integrations	Bing-linked evidence, embedded checkout, mentions

Executive implication

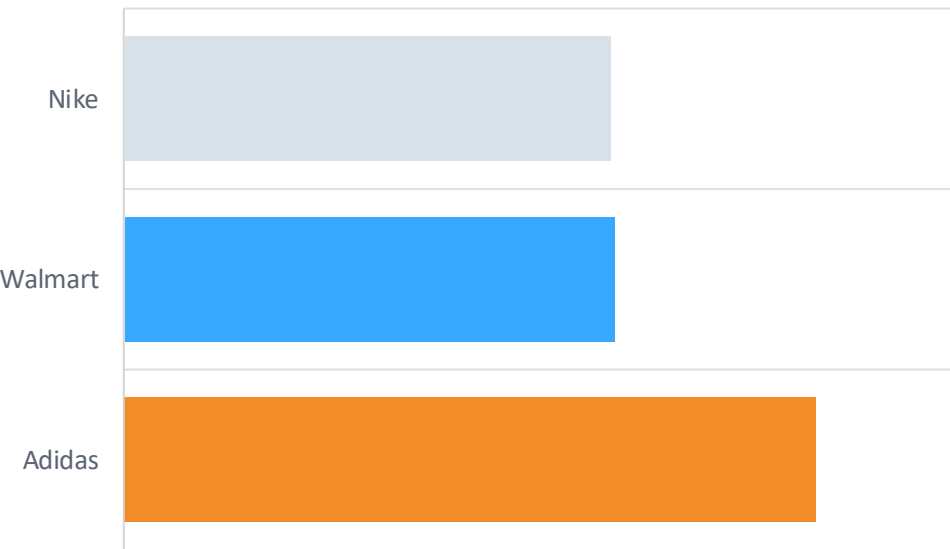
Track a shared prompt universe across engines—but diagnose and optimize each surface separately.

Retail visibility can diverge sharply from market awareness

Beauty shopping answers



Footwear shopping answers



The signal is directional: structured, timely commercial information can outperform brand awareness alone.

Source: Profound Black Friday 2025 analysis as cited in user briefing. Vendor-reported prompt-set snapshots; not market-share measures.

Discovery, comparison, and transaction are converging inside AI



OPEN STANDARDS

UCP connects discovery, merchant systems, inventory, loyalty and checkout.

NATIVE TRANSACTION

ChatGPT Instant Checkout, Google Universal Cart and Perplexity Instant Buy reduce hand-offs.

CATALOG AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Real-time product data becomes a prerequisite for recommendation and fulfillment.

NEW CONTROL POINTS

Offer quality, merchant eligibility, attribution and customer ownership move into the strategy.

GEO becomes commerce infrastructure—not just content optimization.

The vendor market is splitting into measurement, optimization, and agent infrastructure

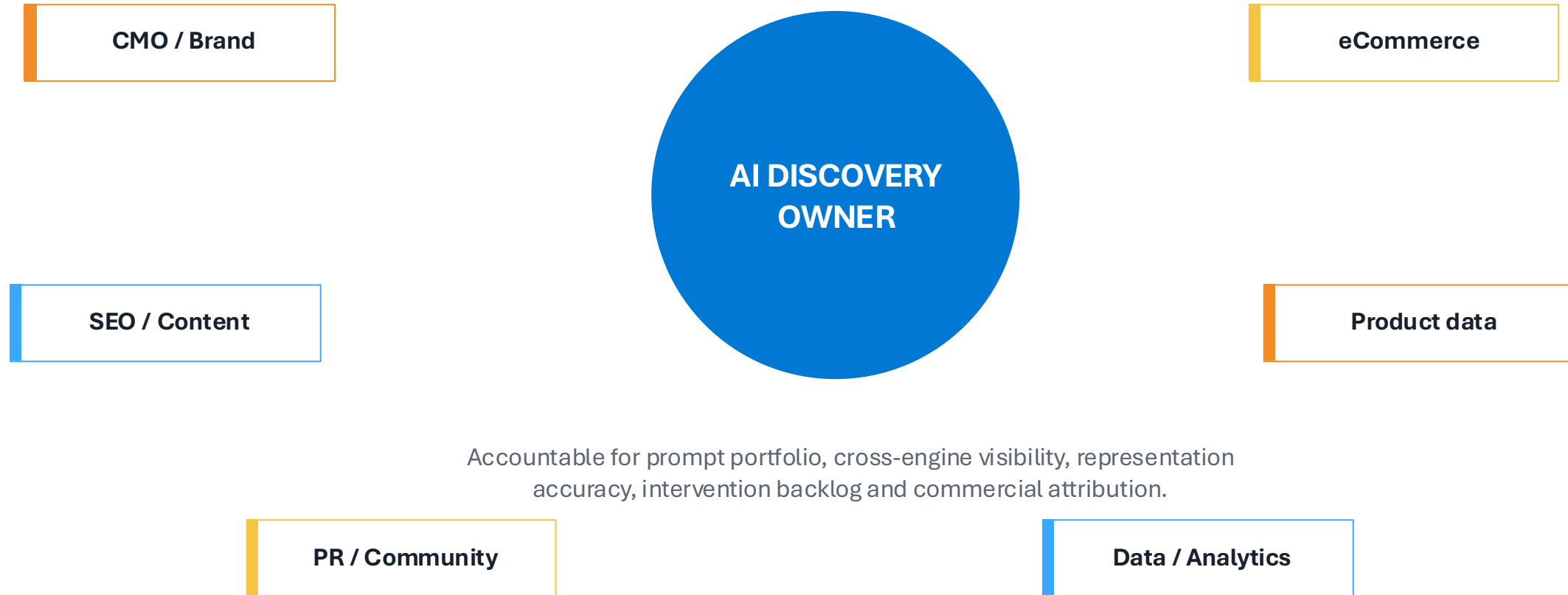
Provider	Strategic center	Best-fit use case
Adobe Brand Visibility + Semrush	Enterprise intelligence + activation	Closed-loop visibility, content optimization, analytics
Profound	Enterprise AI-discovery platform	Prompt intelligence, citations, shopping and agents
BrightEdge AI Catalyst	Enterprise SEO + AI search	Integrated SEO / GEO operations
Peec AI	Specialist monitoring	Fast visibility, sentiment and source tracking
AthenaHQ	GEO workflow platform	Monitoring plus content recommendations
Otterly AI	Accessible monitoring	Prompt and citation tracking for lean teams
Scrunch AI	Agent experience infrastructure	Serve machine consumers and diagnose access

Procure for the business problem

Coverage, prompt realism, engine access, deployment controls, commerce data, attribution, security and workflow—not a single visibility score.

Sources: vendor materials; Adobe/Semrush transaction closed Apr 2026. Claims are vendor-reported and require diligence.

GEO requires a cross-functional owner with a shared commercial scorecard



Governance principle

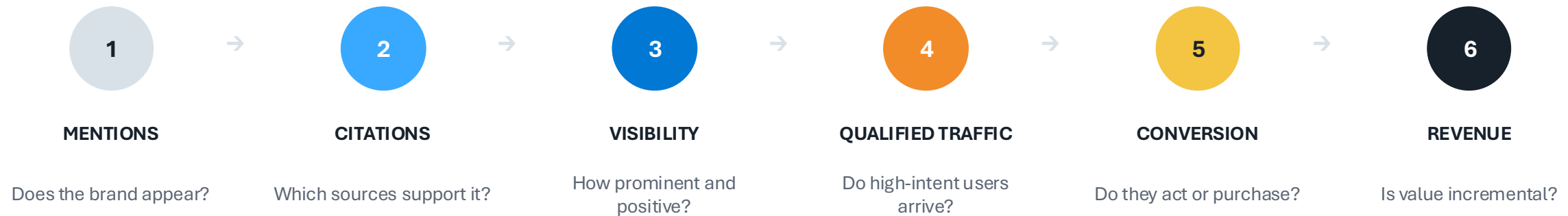
Central accountability; federated execution in the teams that own content, products, reputation, data and commerce.

Private equity should treat GEO as both upside and risk control

A	Visibility	Is the company present across high-value need states and engines?	Baseline
B	Data readiness	Can agents understand products, inventory, price and differentiation?	Audit
C	Narrative control	Are brand attributes accurate, current and corroborated?	Compare
D	Economics	Can exposure be linked to qualified demand, conversion and revenue?	Model
E	Ownership	Does a senior leader own the outcome and intervention backlog?	Assign

Underwrite the gap between conventional digital visibility and AI recommendation share.

Measure value through a KPI chain from mention to revenue



Test design

- 1 Prioritize prompts**
Weight by margin pool, strategic category and decision-stage intent.
- 2 Instrument journeys**
Tag referrals, merchant surfaces, conversions and assisted outcomes.
- 3 Use holdouts**
Separate correlation from incremental impact wherever platform mechanics allow.

Measurement gap: 45% of marketing leaders could not accurately measure AI visibility; only 9% reported tools spanning all relevant metrics (Semrush, 2026).

A 90-day sprint can establish the baseline and capture the first gains

DAYS 0–30

Baseline

- 1 Select 100–500 commercial prompts
- 2 Run across five priority engines
- 3 Benchmark competitors and source domains
- 4 Document inaccuracies and crawler gaps

DAYS 31–60

Diagnose

- 1 Explain competitor appearances
- 2 Audit PDPs, feeds, schema and reviews
- 3 Map high-value content gaps
- 4 Prioritize by value × effort × confidence

DAYS 61–90

Execute + learn

- 1 Upgrade priority product pages
- 2 Fix access, structure and freshness
- 3 Build third-party authority
- 4 Rerun prompts and connect to economics

Day-90 output: prioritized intervention backlog + repeatable scorecard + first commercial readout.

The investment conclusion

Make the commercial presence machine-readable before competitors do.

GEO is not simply “the next SEO.” It is a change in the interface through which consumers discover, evaluate and increasingly purchase products.

**When customers ask an AI system what to buy,
what does it say about us—and what is that answer worth?**

Board decision agenda | Baseline now • assign an owner • fund the first 90-day sprint • tie visibility to economics
