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WHITEPAPER

Get ready for 2026:

What the new digital data means for your strategy

Every year brings a fresh set of global digital data, and 2026's picture is expected to be one of scale, saturation and rapid change.

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of AI projects **have failed**

90%

of employees regularly use **personal AI tools for work**

Today, more people are connected than ever, social media is at near-universal levels, and AI has swiftly moved from a niche tool to a daily habit. Indeed, despite a recent MIT report highlighting that 95% of AI projects have failed, 90% of employees regularly use personal AI tools for work.

In addition, more than **6 billion people are now online**, accounting for roughly 73% of the world's population. Smartphone access continues to drive that connectivity, with around **5.8 billion unique mobile users** - close to 70% of everyone on Earth.

This near-universal access has made marketing a lot noisier. Online audiences are expanding, but their time and intent are spreading across a growing number of platforms, screens and formats. As brands continue to fight for visibility, it's becoming a strategy of precision: finding the conversations that matter and turning impressions into influence. As the growth continues, it's becoming harder to earn attention within it. This means that the next 12 months will demand even smarter choices from tech marketers.

Global connectivity and AI

For anyone in a workplace environment, AI has become second nature. **Global data** shows that over one billion people use large-language-model tools or generative AI platforms every month, and that figure continues to rise.

In parallel, AI-powered features are being embedded into search, social and productivity platforms that already reach billions more.

For brands, this means that audiences are increasingly encountering information mediated by AI, such as summaries, recommendations, comparisons and even conversation snippets generated by algorithms, and this trend will continue to grow. As people get more impatient (especially GenZs!), ensuring your brand is represented accurately in that context depends on the quality of public, verifiable data.

Despite global growth, **over 2.2 billion people remain offline**, concentrated mainly in South Asia and Central Africa. Urban connectivity stands at around 86%, compared with 55% in rural areas, revealing a continuing digital divide.

At the same time, around 71% of women are online compared with 76% of men, leaving roughly 240 million fewer women connected globally. The same pattern appears on social media, where men account for more than half of active users.

Technology firms with global ambitions should leverage this opportunity by tapping into markets where first-time internet users will shape entirely new patterns of consumption and communication. That means preparing for more connected audiences in regions where digital infrastructure and affordability are finally catching up. They will also need to address the gender imbalance, which will be essential for inclusive digital growth and for brands looking to reach the next generation of online audiences.

The social media influence

The world's **5.6 billion social identities** now represent a super-majority of the global population, with almost 1 million people joining every day. In just ten years, social media users have more than doubled, two in three people use social media every month, and most adults now interact with five to seven different social platforms every month.

As a result, social platforms remain a critical source of discovery. Around **one-third of online adults** say social ads introduce them to new products and services. Moreover, among audiences aged 16 to 34, social now ranks as the top discovery channel, ahead of search and TV advertising.

Yet the nature of engagement is changing. People are spending longer inside closed, recommendation-based feeds. Algorithmic discovery has replaced the traditional "follow" model. For tech companies, that means social visibility now depends less on follower counts and more on consistent storytelling across ecosystems. Therefore, they need to look at the combination of posts, mentions, short-form video, and conversational engagement, all reinforcing the same identity.

B2B decision-makers are just as active across social platforms as consumers, and it's shaping how they evaluate vendors. **More than half of buyers** now research companies through social channels, and in the UK alone, almost **55 million people** use social platforms, engaging with more than six each month. Nearly **nine in ten marketers** rely on organic social channels to distribute content, and more than 40% rank it among their most effective channels. This mix of reach and professional relevance makes social a critical space for shaping credibility long before a buyer speaks to sales.

The new face of search

Search engines remain the number-one driver of brand discovery worldwide.

Nearly one in three internet users still turn to search first when researching a product or service. However, global behavioural data shows that fewer searches now translate into website clicks. People are finding answers directly within AI-enhanced search results, voice summaries and knowledge panels. For marketers, this changes what "visibility" means.

As a result, there is a new discipline on the market - Generative Engine Optimisation, or GEO, which is a step-up from traditional SEO that trains AI models to recognise brands as authoritative, even when users never click a link. To appear in AI-generated answers, brands need to ensure their expertise is visible and verifiable across trusted sources: quality PR coverage, well-structured on-site content and consistent third-party mentions.

The power of digital advertising and thought leadership

If we look closer at brand discovery, global advertising investment reached just **over $1.1 trillion in 2024, with digital channels accounting for 72.7% of the total spend**.

Moreover, search advertising generated approximately $316 billion in 2024 - that's nearly $1 billion every day - while social media advertising reached roughly US $207 billion, growing year on year. This means fierce competition - every brand is investing in the same channels, which raises the premium on creative integration. More than ever, PR, owned content and paid performance need to work together to drive credibility and conversions.

Most importantly, organisations need to pay more attention to thought-leadership as it drives the most credibility. Indeed, **recent research** shows that two-thirds of senior professionals dedicate at least an hour each week to thought leadership, and more than 70% trust this type of material over product-led marketing when evaluating a vendor's credibility. Buyers aren't passive either - around **40% regularly** share vendor content with colleagues, and case studies remain one of the most influential formats when teams are choosing a solution.

Preparing for 2026

So, how should tech companies act on this data and prepare for the next year?

- **Audit your discoverability**. Analyse how your brand appears in AI-assisted search results, social summaries and recommendation lists. Identify inconsistencies in how your products or executives are described across the internet.
- **Invest in credible content.** Media coverage, expert commentary and educational resources remain key training material for search engines and AI. In fact, research shows that brands that consistently get published online are more likely to appear in AI-generated results **even without a backlink**.
- **Build relationships.** Always keep in touch with journalists, analysts, content creators and communities that shape your digital footprint. AI engines learn from the sources people trust, so a steady presence in respected publications and expert spaces increases the accuracy and frequency of how your brand is referenced.
- **Measure attention in addition to traffic.** As search and social platforms keep more interactions inside their ecosystems, success metrics need to evolve, too. Mentions, engagement quality and share of voice across verified channels matter as much as clicks.

Digital habits evolve, but they rarely vanish.

Each new channel adds to the mix rather than replacing what came before, creating a broader ecosystem for organisations. Search, analyst content, trade media, social platforms and professional communities all play distinct roles in how decision-makers gather information and assess credibility.

Indeed, no single medium reaches even a third of the audience effectively. Reaching people now should come with balancing depth with diversity - creating great storytelling, credible data and consistent presence across the spaces audiences already trust. In 2026, technology brands will need to continue building on what endures, using new tools to deepen understanding and resist the urge to pursue only one shiny invention.