



Scott Tischler

FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN · AIRECOMMEND.AI

AI & SEARCH

# How AI Agents Are Quietly Taking Over the Buying Decision

By Scott Tischler · July 30, 2026 · 8 min read

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Something changed in the way people buy, and most businesses have not noticed yet. For most of the last two decades, the purchase journey ran through a screen: a person searched, scrolled, compared, clicked, and decided. Every conversion tactic we built assumed a human was on the other end of the glass, reading your headline, feeling your urgency, responding to your reviews.

That assumption is quietly breaking. Increasingly, the entity researching your product, narrowing the field, and in a growing number of cases completing the transaction is not a person at all. It is an **AI agent** acting on that person's behalf. I run Alrecommend.ai, and I spend my days watching how answer engines and autonomous agents decide what to surface and what to buy. What I am seeing is a structural shift, not a gimmick. The buyer is becoming an algorithm, and the businesses that adjust now will own the next decade.

## The buyer is no longer the person

Start with the numbers, and treat them as directional rather than exact. Industry estimates in 2026 put ChatGPT at roughly 800 million weekly active users, with generative AI now driving the majority of AI referral traffic across the web. Around 37% of consumers say they now start a search with an AI tool rather than a traditional search box. Reports circulating this year suggest that close to 39% of US consumers have already used AI to help them shop, from building comparison shortlists to drafting the actual order.

The next step is already underway. **Agentic commerce** describes AI systems that do not just recommend but transact: an agent that holds your preferences, your budget, and your payment credentials, and completes a purchase without you touching a product page. Payment rails are being built specifically for this, with Mastercard's Agent Pay-style frameworks and similar offerings from the major networks designed to let a verified agent pay a merchant on a human's authority. The **Model Context Protocol (MCP)** is emerging as a common standard for how agents connect to tools, catalogs, and services. The plumbing is being laid right now.

Here is the uncomfortable implication. When an agent buys, your persuasion tactics land on no one. There is no human to feel scarcity, notice the hero image, or be moved by a testimonial video. The agent reads structured facts, weighs them against its user's stated criteria, and moves on. The decision has been abstracted away from the person and handed to a process you cannot charm.

## How an agent actually decides

Agents do not shop the way people do, and understanding the difference is the whole game.

A human buyer is emotional, impatient, and easily influenced by presentation. An agent is patient, literal, and relentlessly comparative. It can read a hundred sources in the time a person reads one. It does not get tired of comparison tables. It weights explicit, verifiable attributes far more heavily than vibe. And critically, it tends to trust what is cited and corroborated across sources rather than what a single brand asserts about itself.

The table below captures the shift I keep coming back to with clients.

| Dimension                      | Human buyer                   | AI agent buyer                         |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Sources consulted              | A handful                     | Dozens, in parallel                    |
| What persuades                 | Design, emotion, social proof | Verifiable facts, citations, consensus |
| Patience for comparison        | Low                           | Effectively unlimited                  |
| Brand loyalty                  | Meaningful                    | Weak unless encoded in criteria        |
| Reads your website             | Usually                       | Often never; reads the answer layer    |
| Reacts to urgency and scarcity | Yes                           | No                                     |
| Trust signal                   | Reviews it happens to see     | Structured, cross-referenced evidence  |

The right column is where value is moving. An agent that never loads your homepage still needs to know your product exists, what it costs, who it is for, and why an answer engine should trust the claim. If that information is not legible to machines and corroborated beyond your own domain, you are invisible to the buyer even when you have the better product.

## What breaks when your customer is code

Several long-standing assumptions stop working, and it is worth naming them plainly.

**Traffic stops being the scoreboard.** For years we measured success in sessions and clicks. But an agent that reads your facts from an answer engine and buys on behalf of its user may generate zero

measurable visits. The thing that mattered, the sale, happened without a single line in your analytics that looks like traditional intent. Value is shifting from traffic to **citation-based visibility**: whether you are the source the answer engine names and the agent trusts.

**Conversion-rate optimization loses its target.** A/B testing button colors is meaningless to an entity that does not perceive color as persuasion. The optimization surface moves upstream, to the accuracy, structure, and corroboration of the facts an agent ingests.

**Brand moats get thinner unless they are encoded.** Agents respect brand only insofar as it shows up as a criterion or a well-supported reputation signal. A brand people love but machines cannot verify is a brand at risk.

**Being wrong or absent is expensive.** If an answer engine holds a stale price, a discontinued spec, or an outdated claim about you, the agent acts on that error at scale, and you never get the human moment to correct it.

## Winning when the buyer is an algorithm

None of this is cause for despair. It is a new discipline, and disciplines can be learned. Here is where I tell businesses to focus.

**Make your facts machine-legible and unambiguous.** Structured data, clean specifications, current pricing, explicit use cases, and clear eligibility. Agents reward clarity and punish ambiguity. This is the foundation of both **Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)** and **Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)**, the emerging practices for earning visibility inside AI answers rather than blue links.

**Earn corroboration off your own domain.** Agents trust consensus. Third-party reviews, credible mentions, comparison sites, and independent coverage matter more than another self-authored landing page. The goal is to be the answer that multiple sources agree on.

**Compete on the criteria agents actually weigh.** Price transparency, return policy, verifiable outcomes, and specificity of fit. If your product is genuinely best for a defined buyer, say exactly who that buyer is in terms a machine can match.

**Prepare for direct agent transactions.** Watch MCP and the agentic payment rails. Making your catalog, availability, and pricing accessible to agents through emerging standards is going to move from optional to table stakes faster than most expect. **Vertical agents** built for a specific category tend to outperform general models, so category-specific accuracy pays off.

**Instrument for the two-channel reality.** You now serve two customers at once: the human who still searches and clicks, and the agent that reads and buys. You cannot abandon traditional search, and

you cannot ignore the answer layer. Measure citation share and answer-engine presence alongside your classic metrics, because the old dashboard no longer sees the whole picture.

## The window is open now

The reason I call this a quiet takeover is that it does not announce itself. There is no dramatic day when human buyers vanish. Instead, a rising share of decisions gets delegated, one shortlist and one reorder at a time, until you look up and realize a meaningful slice of your market is being decided by software you never marketed to.

The businesses that win the agentic era will be the ones that treated their facts as a product, earned trust beyond their own walls, and made themselves the answer an engine is willing to stake its recommendation on. That work is available to anyone willing to do it, and right now the field is wide open because most of your competitors are still optimizing for a buyer who is slowly leaving the room.

### Key takeaways

- ② A growing share of purchase decisions is being delegated to AI agents that research, shortlist, and increasingly buy on a person's behalf, so your real customer may be an algorithm.
- ② Agents decide differently than humans: they weigh verifiable, cross-referenced facts over design, emotion, and urgency, and they often never load your website.
- ② Value is shifting from traffic and clicks to citation-based visibility, meaning whether answer engines name and trust you as a source.
- ② Machine-legible facts, transparent pricing, and off-domain corroboration are now the core levers of AEO and GEO.
- ② Agentic payment rails and the MCP standard are laying real infrastructure for agent-initiated transactions in 2026, so making your catalog agent-accessible is becoming table stakes.
- ② You must serve a two-channel reality at once: the human who still searches and the agent that reads and buys, measured on both traditional metrics and citation share.

## Frequently asked questions

### What is agentic commerce?

Agentic commerce refers to AI agents that do not just recommend products but actually complete purchases on a person's behalf, using stored preferences, budgets, and payment credentials. In 2026, payment networks are

building dedicated rails, such as Mastercard Agent Pay-style frameworks, to authorize these agent-driven transactions. It moves the buyer from a human clicking a checkout button to an algorithm acting under a human's authority.

### **If AI agents buy without visiting my site, how do I even reach them?**

You reach agents through the answer layer, not your homepage. That means making your facts machine-legible with structured data, keeping pricing and specs current, and earning corroboration from third-party sources that answer engines trust. The discipline is Answer Engine Optimization and Generative Engine Optimization, which focus on being the cited, trusted source inside AI answers.

### **Does this mean SEO and my website no longer matter?**

No. We are in a two-channel reality where human buyers still search and click while a growing share of decisions are delegated to agents. Traditional search and a strong site still serve real customers, but you now also have to be visible and trusted inside AI answers. The mistake is treating it as either-or instead of both.

### **How is an AI agent's buying behavior different from a human's?**

Agents are patient, literal, and relentlessly comparative, reading dozens of sources in parallel and weighting verifiable facts over design, emotion, or scarcity. They do not respond to urgency tactics and show weak brand loyalty unless the brand is encoded as an explicit criterion. They tend to trust claims that are corroborated across multiple sources rather than asserted by a single brand.

### **What metrics should I track if agents drive sales without generating traffic?**

Add citation share and answer-engine presence to your dashboard, meaning how often engines name you as a source and whether you appear for relevant queries. These sit alongside your traditional metrics rather than replacing them. The key shift is measuring citation-based visibility, because agent-driven sales can happen with little or no visible session data.

### **What is MCP and why does it matter for buying?**

The Model Context Protocol is an emerging standard for how AI agents connect to external tools, catalogs, and services. It matters because it provides a common way for agents to access your product data and, increasingly, to transact. Making your catalog and pricing accessible through emerging standards like MCP is moving from optional to expected.

### **What is the single most important thing to do first?**

Make your core facts unambiguous and machine-legible: current pricing, clear specifications, explicit use cases, and who the product is genuinely best for. Ambiguity is punished by agents and clarity is rewarded. From there, earn off-domain corroboration so multiple sources agree on your claims.

### **Are these 2026 figures precise?**

No, they are directional industry estimates reported in 2026, not exact measurements. Numbers like roughly 800 million weekly ChatGPT users, about 37% of consumers starting with AI, and near 39% using AI to shop should be read as approximate signals of scale and momentum. The trend they point to is what matters, and that trend is clearly toward delegated, agent-assisted buying.

**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 study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.