

DIGITAL MUST-HAVES 2026

HOW BRANDS GET DISCOVERED,
EVALUATED, AND CHOSEN IS
CHANGING FAST.

Don't get left behind.

J | CONNELLY

The Discovery Layer Is Being Rewritten

Communications in 2026 operates under a new set of rules.

AI-powered answer engines are replacing traditional search as the primary discovery mechanism. Social platforms function as both communities and search tools. Brand reputation isn't just what people think anymore—it's what AI believes and repeats.

Winners won't be the brands with the most content. They'll be the brands structured to be cited, trusted, and interpreted correctly by both humans and machines. They'll be the brands with clarity: clear positioning, clear expertise, and consistent truth across every surface where buyers (and their AI tools) do research.

This report walks through the shifts that matter most and connects each to concrete action you can take now. JConnelly operates at the intersection of visibility and reputation. We specialize in SEO and Generative Engine Optimization. We build paid media and lead generation systems that drive real pipeline growth. We develop social strategy that turns platforms into credibility engines. We broker influencer partnerships that carry weight. We scale executive thought leadership without introducing risk. And we manage online reputation across both traditional and AI-driven discovery models.

Underpinning all of this work is earned media. Third-party validation remains the most trusted form of credibility. Media coverage, awards, and expert citations amplify every other channel. They provide the proof points that AI models rely on, the social proof that buyers seek, and the authority signals that answer engines reward. Earned media isn't just complementary to digital strategy—it's the foundation that makes the rest possible.

The playbook is changing. Here's your guide to staying ahead.



This report covers eight interconnected strategies for building visibility and trust in 2026.

**1. Earned Media:
The Credibility Multiplier**

**2. Getting Found
in the Answer Layer**

**3. Your Reputation
Lives Inside LLMs Now**

**4. People Buy from People
(With Guardrails)**

**5. Social as Search, Community
& Customer Care**

**6. Shaping Preference
Early in the Journey**

**7. Efficiency Over Volume
in Paid Media**

**8. Expertise & Affinity
Beat Big Reach**

1

Earned Media: The Credibility Multiplier

Why third-party validation still matters most

In a landscape crowded with branded content, paid ads, and AI-generated noise, earned media cuts through. Media coverage and expert commentary carry a level of credibility that owned and paid channels simply cannot replicate. Buyers trust what others say about you more than what you say about yourself.

Earned media also amplifies every other channel. It provides the proof points that populate your thought leadership. It supplies the authority signals that answer engines cite when generating responses. It delivers the social proof that validates your claims on LinkedIn and in search results. And it gives your paid campaigns something real to point to when buyers are evaluating credibility.

Earned media matters for reasons well beyond AI — it builds credibility, drives awareness, and shapes how buyers evaluate you at every stage. But in the context of GEO specifically, it carries unique weight: earned media influences how AI models describe your brand. Large language models learn from authoritative sources: news coverage, industry publications, analyst reports, and expert commentary. When your brand appears in these contexts consistently, AI systems begin citing you as a credible reference. This creates a compounding effect: the more authoritative sources reference you, the more confidently AI systems cite you — and the more visible you become to buyers, journalists, and analysts who rely on those systems.

*Buyers trust what others say about you more than what you say about yourself. **Earned media amplifies every other channel** — it's the foundation that makes digital strategies credible.*

WHERE TO START:

Build journalist and analyst relationships.

Identify the reporters, publications, and analysts who cover your space and invest in becoming a reliable, non-promotional resource for them.

Position executives as expert sources.

Equip leaders with commentary, data, and perspectives that go beyond marketing messaging.

Develop a drumbeat of newsworthy content.

Original research, timely trend commentary, and real client results give media something to actually cover. Make it a regular cadence, not a one-off push.

Integrate coverage into your broader strategy.

Repurpose earned media into social content, sales enablement, and paid amplification — so each placement works harder and longer.

At JConnelly, we position your brand in the conversations that shape your category. We secure coverage that builds authority, supports search visibility, and provides the third-party validation that makes every other channel more effective. Earned media isn't an add-on—it's the foundation that makes digital strategies credible.

2

Getting Found in the Answer Layer

Why traditional SEO isn't enough anymore

Search has fundamentally changed. Google's AI Overviews now surface summarized answers instead of links. ChatGPT, Perplexity, and other conversational engines deliver information without sending users to websites. And we've entered the age of AI agents: tools that research, compare, and recommend on behalf of users without human oversight at each step.

This creates a new visibility challenge. Most brands fail here because their information is fragmented, inconsistent across platforms, or buried under high-volume generic content. Your brand needs structured, accessible, authoritative information that answer engines can parse and confidently reference. Traditional link-building and keyword targeting still matter, but they're the bare minimum. The new game is Answer Engine Optimization and Generative Engine Optimization.

Recent research from [Kantar's 2026 Marketing Trends](#) report documents a displacement effect: as AI-powered discovery tools mature, traditional search traffic patterns are shifting. Brands that wait to adapt risk becoming invisible in the layer where decisions actually get made.

Start by building a structured source-of-truth hub: a centralized, machine-readable repository of leadership bios, service descriptions, proof points, case studies, and FAQs written for both human readers and machine parsers.

If answer engines cannot confidently extract and verify your expertise, they will not reference you.

Traditional link-building and keyword targeting still matter, but they're the bare minimum. Brands that wait to adapt risk becoming invisible in the layer where decisions actually get made.

WHERE TO START:

Standardize positioning language across every owned property.

Your website, LinkedIn pages, press coverage, and third-party listings should describe your category, services, and differentiators in consistent terms. LLMs reward repetition and clarity.

Implement structured data and schema markup.

Ensure search engines and answer engines can interpret entities, authorship, services, reviews, and FAQs without ambiguity.

Elevate named experts.

Content attributed to identifiable subject matter experts carries more authority signals than anonymous brand copy.

Audit answer-engine outputs quarterly.

Prompt major LLMs with category queries, comparison queries, and competitor prompts. Document inaccuracies. Fix the source content rather than trying to "game" the output.

Prioritize depth over volume.

One definitive guide that clearly owns a topic outperforms ten surface-level posts optimized for keywords alone.

JConnelly's SEO/GEO program helps brands win visibility in both traditional search and the emerging answer layer. We focus on technical SEO hygiene, content architecture that machines can understand, and authority-building strategies designed for how discovery actually works in 2026. When buyers ask questions your brand can answer, we ensure you own those answers across every platform.

3

Your Reputation Lives Inside LLMs Now

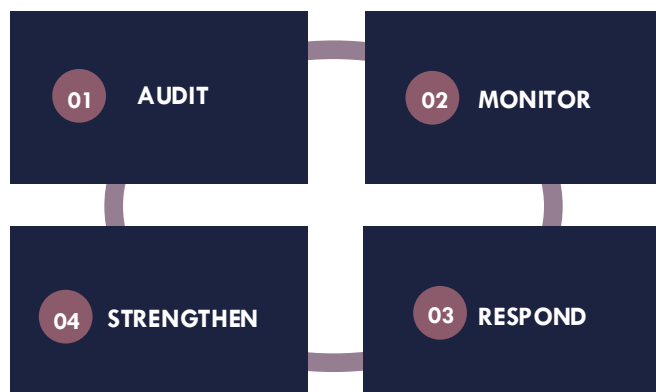
Managing what AI says about you

Reputation management used to mean controlling search results and monitoring headlines. In 2026, it also means managing what AI tools say about you. Buyers, journalists, and stakeholders increasingly use large language models for research, and inaccuracies can scale fast. If ChatGPT or Perplexity mischaracterizes your positioning, that distortion scales instantly and repeatedly.

At the same time, misinformation and disinformation tactics are becoming more sophisticated. Deepfakes, synthetic visuals, and coordinated amplification campaigns can damage reputations quickly. Brands need monitoring that goes beyond mentions to understand how narratives form, spread, and mutate across platforms and AI systems. Most companies are not auditing this layer at all.

Reputation now has an algorithmic dimension — and most brands aren't managing it.

THE AI REPUTATION CYCLE



If ChatGPT or Perplexity mischaracterizes your positioning, that distortion scales instantly and repeatedly. Brands need monitoring that goes beyond mentions to understand how narratives form, spread, and mutate across platforms and AI systems.

WHERE TO START:

Conduct structured prompt audits.

Run consistent prompts across major LLMs covering brand descriptions, competitor comparisons, and category positioning.

Track narrative drift over time.

Document changes in how your brand is described throughout the year.

Strengthen authoritative third-party references.

Earned media, analyst mentions, and expert citations influence model outputs more than brand self-description alone.

Develop rapid-response protocols.

Coordinate SEO updates, public statements, and social responses when misinformation appears.

Define narrative health KPIs.

Foundational metrics include accuracy rate across AI outputs, comparative positioning versus competitors, misinformation volume, and the tone and language AI systems use when describing your brand.

JConnelly's Online Reputation Management program protects and strengthens your digital footprint through monitoring, narrative strategy, reputation-focused SEO/GEO, and proactive issue prevention. We help ensure AI-generated narratives about your brand reflect reality, wherever people are turning to learn more about you.

4

People Buy from People (With Guardrails)

Scaling executive voice while managing risk

In B2B, people still buy from people. LinkedIn research confirms that thought leadership remains one of the most trusted ways to evaluate vendor capabilities. The shift in 2026 is scale: generative AI tools are putting content creation into more employees' hands, which brings speed and risk in equal measure. Without governance, brands risk legal exposure, inconsistent positioning, and public credibility erosion.

Forrester predicts that by the end of 2026, leadership and employee voices will matter more than ever, and governance becomes a brand requirement. Companies need to empower their people to contribute while protecting brand consistency, legal compliance, and message quality.

Visibility without governance introduces risk. Governance without visibility wastes opportunity.



Our Digital Thought Leadership program turns executives and internal experts into trusted category voices. We provide strategy, training, editorial development, and distribution channels that protect the brand while scaling visibility. The result is thought leadership that earns buyer trust, drives pipeline, and positions your leaders as the authorities buyers turn to when they're ready to decide.

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WHERE TO START:

Define 3–5 core POV pillars per executive.

These should align to strategic growth priorities and category differentiation.

Create editorial guardrails.

Document approved language, restricted topics, compliance review processes, and tone guidelines.

Repurpose intelligently.

Long-form insights should cascade into short-form posts, video clips, and newsletter segments.

Train leaders on platform dynamics.

Each platform rewards different formats and engagement styles.

Monitor executive visibility impact.

Track inbound engagement, speaking invitations, media requests, and pipeline influence tied to executive activity.

5

Social as Search, Community, and Customer Care

The platform ecosystem has become mission-critical

Social platforms are no longer optional marketing channels. For many buyers, they are the first and sometimes only layer of validation. They're where audiences discover brands, validate claims, and pressure-test messages. Social search continues to grow, particularly among younger demographics who start product and service research on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube rather than Google. And communities on platforms like LinkedIn, Reddit, and specialized forums increasingly influence B2B decisions without buyers ever visiting corporate websites.

Brands still treating social as a broadcast channel are losing relevance. [Marketing Brew's research](#) suggests that 'real and intentional' will outperform endless output. Trust is under pressure, and quality consistently beats quantity.

Social now functions as a public due diligence layer.

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WHERE TO START:

Audit how your brand appears in platform search results.

Test keyword discovery within LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, and Reddit.

Develop distinct content formats by platform.

LinkedIn: POV-driven commentary. YouTube: explanatory depth. Instagram/TikTok: short-form authority positioning.

Formalize social response protocols.

Define response timelines, tone standards, and escalation triggers for potential issues.

Activate employees intentionally.

Equip internal experts with structured talking points instead of leaving participation ad hoc.

Track credibility indicators.

Engagement quality, comment sentiment, share behavior, and inbound inquiries are stronger signals than reach alone.

JConnelly's Social Media Marketing program helps brands show up with clarity and consistency, turning channels into credibility engines. We work across content creation, community strategy, and platform-specific execution to ensure your social presence supports business goals, not just vanity metrics.

6

Shaping Preference Early in the Journey

How paid search influences decisions, not just captures clicks

By the time a buyer enters a search query, their preferences are often already formed. Research from [TechnologyAdvice confirms](#) what many B2B marketers already feel: buying decisions increasingly happen earlier in the journey, during research phases that are harder to track. The ‘moment of intent’ visible in search is often just the final step of a much longer, mostly invisible evaluation.

Paid search that only captures demand is late. The advantage comes from shaping preference earlier in the research cycle. The winners in 2026 will use SEM to show up across the entire research arc with the right message, the right proof, and the right next step. Especially in B2B, where buying committees are larger and trust is harder to earn, search marketing needs to function as a preference-building tool, not just a lead capture mechanism.

The goal is preference formation, not just lead capture.

THE BUYER RESEARCH ARC



SEM should shape preference at every stage — not just capture intent at the end.

The ‘moment of intent’ visible in search is often just the final step of a much longer, mostly invisible evaluation. Search marketing needs to function as a preference-building tool, not just a lead capture mechanism.

WHERE TO START:

Develop keyword coverage across three layers:

Problem awareness, solution comparison, and vendor evaluation.

Build landing pages for objections.

Pricing transparency, implementation timelines, compliance standards, integration complexity—address these directly.

Integrate third-party validation.

Case studies, media mentions, analyst references, and awards should appear in mid-funnel campaigns, not just on “About” pages.

Sequence messaging.

Use retargeting and layered search campaigns to progressively deepen proof rather than repeating the same pitch.

Measure influence, not just conversion.

Track view-through impact, assisted conversions, and multi-touch engagement patterns.

JConnelly’s Search Engine Marketing program positions your brand where decision-makers look first, bridging discovery, consideration, and conversion with paid strategies built for longer cycles and higher scrutiny. We help you meet buyers throughout their journey.

7

Efficiency Over Volume in Paid Media

First-party data and smart targeting win the day

The paid media landscape has moved from ‘cheap reach’ to ‘high-signal efficiency.’ Targeting has gotten more constrained thanks to privacy regulations and platform changes, which means the edge now comes from better data, cleaner conversion tracking, and smarter use of AI tools. More budget without better data just magnifies the inefficiency. Performance comes from stronger signals, not bigger spend.

At the same time, marketing organizations are shifting from using generative AI for speed to using it for precision. [The World Federation of Advertisers notes](#) that leading teams are focusing AI on improving creative performance, tightening audience targeting, and reducing wasted spend without sacrificing quality. The winners invest where the signal is strongest, not where the spending is easiest.

Efficiency now depends on signal integrity, not media scale.

SIGNAL OVER NOISE

01

DATA
QUALITY

02

CONVERSION
CLARITY

03

CREATIVE
PRECISION

More budget without better data just magnifies the inefficiency. Performance comes from stronger signals, not bigger spend. The winners invest where the signal is strongest, not where the spending is easiest.

WHERE TO START:

Clean your event taxonomy.

Define and standardize what constitutes a lead, MQL, SQL, and qualified opportunity across platforms. Remove duplicate or inflated signals.

Audit conversion pathways.

Map every step from ad click to CRM entry. Identify where attribution breaks, forms drop off, or UTMs are lost.

Align marketing and sales around shared KPIs.

Shift performance reviews toward pipeline contribution, opportunity quality, and revenue influence—not raw form fills.

Use AI for controlled experimentation.

Test creative variations intentionally: headline framing, proof positioning, CTA sequencing. Kill underperformers quickly.

Consolidate fragmented audiences.

Over-segmentation often weakens signal strength. Broader, high-quality first-party audiences frequently outperform hyper-narrow targeting.

JConnelly's Pay Per Click and Lead Generation program connects targeting, creative, landing experience, and measurement so every dollar drives accountable results. We help you scale performance efficiently by building campaigns that improve over time.

8

Expertise and Affinity Beat Big Reach

Influencer marketing grows up, especially in B2B

Influencer marketing is maturing fast, and not just in consumer categories. [Forrester predicts](#) increased investment in influencer relations across B2B, where buyers demand is growing for credible human interpretation of complex topics. Subject matter experts, trusted third parties, and niche voices with real expertise carry more weight than follower counts ever could. Authority compounds through alignment, not reach spikes.

At the same time, the rules are tightening. Brands will need stronger compliance standards and better partnership structures, particularly in sensitive categories like finance, health, and policy. The days of casual, one-off influencer posts are ending. One-off influencer activations rarely move serious buying decisions. What's replacing them is more strategic, more accountable, and ultimately more valuable.

The objective is sustained credibility, not short-term exposure.

WHAT DRIVES B2B INFLUENCE

REACH ALONE

- X High follower counts
- X One-off sponsored posts
- X Surface-level engagement
- X Vanity metrics

*Doesn't move
buying decisions*

CREDIBILITY

- ✓ Domain expertise
- ✓ Long-term partnerships
- ✓ Audience trust & depth
- ✓ Narrative influence

*Compounds over time,
drives decisions*

Authority compounds through alignment, not reach spikes. Forrester predicts increased investment in influencer relations across B2B, where credible human interpretation of complex topics drives decisions.

WHERE TO START:

Vet for domain credibility.

Review past content depth, audience composition, and partnership track record—not just engagement metrics.

Build long-term collaboration frameworks.

Multi-touch campaigns outperform single sponsored posts.

Integrate influencer content into paid and owned ecosystems.

Amplify high-performing expert content through paid distribution.

Establish compliance workflows.

Pre-approval standards, disclosure requirements, and content review processes reduce risk.

Measure narrative contribution.

Track how influencer partnerships shift brand positioning within industry conversations.

JConnelly's Influencer Marketing program connects brands with the right voices and structures partnerships that are brand-safe, performance-aware, and built to last. We focus on creating relationships that drive sustained business impact.

BUILDING SYSTEMS FOR



VISIBILITY AND TRUST

The brands that succeed in 2026 will build systems for authority across every discovery surface: traditional search, AI answer engines, social platforms, paid channels, influencer networks, and earned media.

JConnelly helps clients do exactly that. We bring data-driven strategy, channel-native execution, and reputation-first storytelling to organizations that want to stay ahead of these shifts. Whether you need to fix how AI describes your company, build executive thought leadership that drives pipeline, or create paid campaigns that actually convert, we work with you to turn unique value into competitive advantage.

The playbook is new.

Let's turn 2026's shifts into measurable growth for your brand.

READY TO NAVIGATE THESE SHIFTS STRATEGICALLY?

LET'S TALK.

GET IN TOUCH WITH US AT WWW.JCONNELLY.COM