

WHERE THE FUNNEL GOES DARK

Most of what moves a B2B buying decision happens where no tool can follow. A look at building demand gen for the parts of the funnel you can't see.

By Natalie Bahmanyar

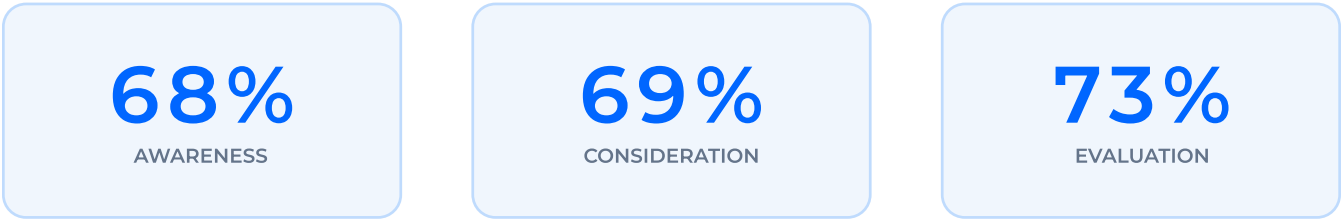
B2B demand generation has always had a visibility problem.

The buyer’s path from first impression to signed contract has historically been murky—known in pieces, and filled with educated guesses. AI was supposed to fix that, and in some ways it has: more signals, faster production, better prioritization. The top of the funnel is better lit than ever before. But AI has also drawn a hard line around where the data stops. Most of what shapes a buying decision—peer influence, community, organizational reputations—still happens where no tool can follow.

So what does a demand generation strategy look like when most of the funnel is off the record? Before answering that, it helps to see where the decision actually forms. TechInformed Marketing Solutions hosted a webinar with Elena Simkina, senior director of demand generation at Acronis.

The decision moves to the middle

Our latest Voice of the Buyer research found that marketers believe AI shapes the buyer journey most in the middle: **68%** at awareness, **69%** at consideration, **73%** at evaluation. AI’s pull is strongest in exactly the stretch where buyers compare claims and build their shortlist—the part of the journey demand gen has always struggled to see into.



“A good lead in 2026 is from a company that fits your ICP and is already in motion,” says Simkina. “A form fill is not the signal.” In fact, by the time a prospect downloads a whitepaper, most of the decision has already happened somewhere untracked: a private Slack group, a peer DM, a LinkedIn post seen a few weeks earlier.

Despite this reality, a lot of today’s B2B teams develop content built around the download, the form, the inbound request. That model made sense when gated content was the primary research channel. It reads differently now that a buyer can get a comparison table, an implementation framework, and an ROI estimate from an AI tool in three minutes.

What earns attention now

So where is attention actually going? Simkina points to a few consistent patterns: content from individual executives and practitioners outperforms brand-level publishing. Original research with proprietary data earns media coverage, analyst citations, and increasingly, AI citations. Small, high-trust formats—peer dinners, practitioner roundtables—remain a staple precisely because they can't be replicated or automated. And community participation, across social media platforms and industry forums, shapes vendor shortlists in ways attribution tools can't fully capture.

**Executive & practitioner content**
Individual voices outperform brand-level publishing.

**Original proprietary research**
Earns media, analyst, and AI citations.

**High-trust small formats**
Peer dinners and roundtables that can't be automated.

**Community participation**
Shapes shortlists where attribution can't reach.

Moreover, Simkina also highlights that marketing teams now have a newer audience to court directly: AI itself. She cites a recent example from Salesforce, which described generative AI as a kind of customer whose perception of a brand needs shaping before a human buyer ever gets involved.

Where AI earns its keep...and doesn't

AI's clearest wins are still in production speed and prioritization: drafting, scoring, personalizing across a lot of accounts at once. A concrete example of this, according to Simkina, is how AI-driven analysis of trade show attendee intent signals helped double an event's ROI, letting sales teams walk in prepared for specific accounts instead of working the room cold.

AI STRENGTHS

- ✓ Production speed & drafting
- ✓ Lead scoring & prioritization
- ✓ Personalization at scale
- ✓ Intent signal analysis
- ✓ Event ROI optimization

AI GAPS

- ✓ Judgment-heavy decisions
- ✓ Enterprise pilots underdelivering
- ✓ Outputs needing heavy rework
- ✓ Dark funnel still invisible
- ✓ Templated outreach detected

As of mid-2026, AI still underdelivers anywhere judgment is required. According to Simkina, most enterprise AI pilots haven't hit their original business case, and a lot of AI outputs still need real rework before being usable, especially in technical categories where buyers can spot imprecision immediately. And the dark funnel hasn't closed: AI hasn't made peer conversations or community discussions any more visible to analytics stacks, and buyers can recognize templated outreach on sight.

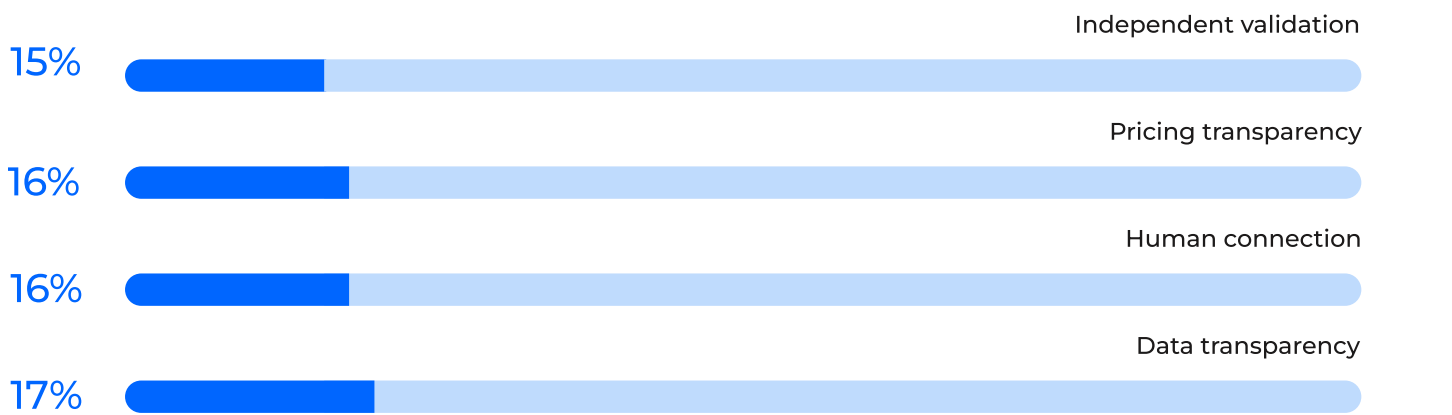
Answer engine optimization

A growing share of buyers now start research with an AI chatbot rather than a search engine, and those tools provide with sourced data, credible external references, and content that leads with a direct answer. For Acronis, visibility in those results is growing month over month. Most B2B companies aren't there yet. Simkina offered a structural reason: for years, brand-awareness budgets have remained lean in favor of lower-funnel spend that's easier to attribute—a dynamic Gartner has termed a **"brand doom loop."**

Because generative AI visibility rewards accumulated brand signal—mentions, reviews, discussion volume—more than recent spend, the companies that kept investing in awareness through that squeeze are now seeing an outsized, largely unplanned payoff in how visible they are inside AI answers.

The trust paradox

Two-thirds of marketers in our research say building trust with buyers is harder than it was two years ago. Asked what actually builds buyer confidence, marketers named data transparency (17%), pricing transparency (16%), human connection (16%), and independent validation (15%)—a near-even spread that says trust isn't one lever but a set of them, and that AI helps only when it clarifies rather than obscures. It amplifies those signals to the degree that it improves transparency, enables validation, and stays paired with a person.



Building for what you can't measure

We don't know yet whether demand generation is ready for an AI-shaped buying journey. We do know the teams making progress aren't waiting for the funnel to become fully visible before they act. They're investing now—in channels that shape reputation before a buyer reaches the pipeline, in content that earns trust, and in treating AI as a tool for speed and prioritization rather than a substitute for judgment. Simkina's own shorthand for that posture: keep humans at the helm of AI, not just in the loop with it.



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