

GEN Z + AI SEARCH PLAYBOOK · 2026

Meet Them Where They Scroll

How Gen Z buys in 2026 — and why your business is invisible if you don't adapt.

If you only remember one thing today, remember this:

**Your customer didn't stop searching.
They stopped using Google to do it.**

BY MATT FLESHMAN

Founder — OTB Social Media · ProMotiveCar

Fenton, MO · otbsocialmediastl.com

Published from the AU Connect Luncheon · May 13, 2026



SCAN: otbsocialmediastl.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shift Already Happened

Your customer didn't stop searching. They stopped using Google to do it. TikTok, YouTube, and ChatGPT are now the front door of buying behavior — Google has quietly moved to the verification step at the end. Gen Z (13 to 28 in 2026) led this shift, but it's spreading fast — Millennials are already there, and through their kids and grandkids, Gen X and Boomers are too.

This playbook walks you through what changed, why it matters for your business, and the three jobs every business owner needs to start this month to stay in the conversation.

THE PROMISE

You'll leave this playbook knowing exactly three things to do for your business.

AT-A-GLANCE

65%

of Gen Z uses TikTok as a search engine

Source: Adobe / ALM Corp

900M

weekly ChatGPT users — up from 800M in Oct.

Source: TechCrunch

47%

of consumers have used AI to make a purchase

Source: Eight Oh Two

SECTION 1

Who Is the Buyer?

Gen Z is **13 to 28 years old in 2026**. The older half is already buying cars, signing leases, choosing insurance, picking restaurants, and hiring contractors. They're not 'the future.' They're already at the table.

But here's the part most business owners miss: **Gen Z is influencing upward**. When a Millennial parent doesn't know which laptop to buy — they ask their kid. When a Gen X dad doesn't know which restaurant to try Friday — the kid shows him a TikTok. When a grandparent can't figure out the new AI tool, the grandkid sets it up.

When we say 'market to Gen Z,' we're not telling you to abandon your 45-year-old customer. We're telling you the 45-year-old customer has a 16-year-old in the passenger seat with a phone — and that 16-year-old is the actual research department.

THE QUESTION TO WRITE DOWN

If the kid is the research department — is your business something they'd find, screenshot, and send to mom?

SECTION 2

Where Your Customer Actually Is

Reality check, because we hear it every week: 'Matt, I'm on Facebook, I'm good.' No. You're not. Here's the platform breakdown:

Platform	Who's there	What it does
TikTok	25–34 is the largest group; 18–44 = ~82% of users	Discovery engine. Where Gen Z searches.
Instagram	25–34 is the largest US group	Visual proof. Where decisions get validated.
YouTube	Universal — 91% of Gen Z teens; older audiences too	Proof and tutorial. The decision-confirmer.
Facebook	Older skew. Still real, but narrowing.	Local reach for 40+ — only one demo.
LinkedIn	25–34 dominates; strongest for B2B	Professional credibility + B2B referrals.
ChatGPT / AI	All ages adopting — Gen Z + Millennials lead	The actual recommendation engine.

And the kicker: **45% of Gen Z says TikTok and Instagram are the top platforms influencing their purchases.** YouTube is right behind at 38%. If your business only lives on Facebook, you're talking to one demographic and missing the rest. That's the leak.

SECTION 3

The Search Shift

These platforms aren't just for entertainment anymore. They're search engines. Here's the data:

- **65% of Gen Z** has used TikTok as a search engine. Not Instagram. Not Facebook. TikTok. As. A. Search. Engine.
- **ChatGPT has ~900 million weekly active users** — up from 800M last October. That's not a tech-bro tool anymore.
- **47% of all consumers** — **56% of Gen Z, 55% of Millennials** — have already used AI to make a purchase decision.
- **44% of AI-search users** say AI is their #1 preferred source for insight. Traditional search comes second at 31%.

THE QUOTE TO REMEMBER

“Older users treat ChatGPT like a Google replacement. People in their 20s and 30s treat it like a life advisor. College students treat it like an operating system.”

— Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI

Read that line again. **College students treat it like an operating system.** That's not a habit you wait out. It started with Gen Z, it's bleeding into Millennials right now, and the next section shows how it's already reached every other generation too.

SECTION 3.5

It's Already In Their Living Room

DIRECTV just rebranded their streaming box. They call it **Gemini Air**. The remote has a Google Assistant button right in the middle. You press that button and ask the TV anything. *'Find me a good local roofer.'* *'What's the best SUV for grandkids?'* *'Where should I go to dinner?'* The TV answers.

By this summer, the idle screensaver on that TV becomes an AI shopping feed — scan a QR code, it generates an avatar of you, and starts recommending real products: clothes, cars, vacations. That's Glance AI, built with Google. Live in 2026.

THE THREE LANDSCAPE SHIFTS

1**AI search left the phone.**

It's on the biggest screen in the house — the TV in your living room.

2 **Idle TV time is now active commerce.**
Personalized AI shopping feeds replacing screensavers.

3 **Recommendation beats listing.**
Every surface collapses dozens of options into one or two answers. If you're not the answer, you don't exist.

Translation: **the AI recommendation engine is now sitting on the coffee table of the 70-year-old your business depends on.** The grandkid taught them how to press the microphone button. They're already asking.

SECTION 4

Why This Is Happening So Fast

It's not because AI is smarter. Or cooler. It's one word: **convenience**.

People walk around all day with half-formed needs in their heads. Things they want. Things they need to figure out. Things they want to organize. AI lets them dump that mess in and get an answer. Examples we see every day:

- *'What should I do with this room?'* → upload a photo → get a redesign plan.
- *'I want to take my kids somewhere this summer.'* → AI builds the trip.
- *'Help me write this email / book / business plan.'* → AI structures the thought.
- *'Which SUV is safest for a teen driver?'* → AI hands back three ranked options with reasoning and sources.

THE TAKEAWAY

“AI didn't replace search. It replaced the part of your brain that used to organize the question before you searched. That's why people don't go back.”

Once your brain stops doing that work, you don't volunteer to do it again. You don't open ten tabs. You don't compare seven websites. You ask once. You get an answer. You move on.

SECTION 5

How AI Decides Who to Recommend

In the live demo at the luncheon, we asked AI to recommend three redesign concepts for a space at Adventure Unknown. Then we asked it to walk us through its reasoning. Here's what mattered:

AI references — design blogs, Pinterest trends, articles about coworking aesthetics, businesses that got featured, and specific brands. **The reason those brands and products got recommended is because they published content AI could read.** Reviews, articles, structured product pages, blog posts, social proof.

THE BIG LESSON

AI is making recommendations about your business right now. Today. Whether you're paying attention or not. The only question is whether you like what it's saying.

If AI can't find structured information about you — clean website, real reviews, third-party mentions, content that answers actual customer questions — it won't recommend you. It'll recommend the business that did the homework.

SECTION 6

The Reality Check

Straight talk. We talk to 20 to 30 business owners every single week. Here's the truth:

- **Most don't have a basic marketing plan.** Nothing written down. Nothing they could hand you in a meeting.
- **They're not putting out brand information consistently.** One post a month, one campaign a quarter, then silence.
- **They're not making content that influences a buying decision.** The content is “we exist” instead of “here's why you should choose us.”
- **And they are absolutely not built to be recommended by AI** — the new game we just walked through.

THE NEW RULE

Showing up isn't the goal anymore. Being recommended is the goal.

The businesses that figure this out in the next six months are going to take market share from the ones that don't. It's that simple.

SECTION 7 · THE PLAYBOOK

Three Jobs Every Business Needs This Month

01 Be Discoverable

On TikTok and YouTube

- Post short video content consistently — minimum 2x/week.
 - Use a real face. Stop hiding behind your logo.
 - Hook in 3 seconds. Local search terms in captions.
 - Trend audio when it fits. Don't force it.
 - Pin a 60-second “who we are” video to your profile.
-

02 Be Recommendable

In AI search (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini)

- Clean website structure — clear page titles, headings, location, services.
 - Real customer reviews — Google + industry-specific (Yelp, Cars.com, BBB, etc.).
 - Third-party mentions — local news, blogs, podcasts, directories.
 - Content that answers actual customer questions, in plain language.
 - FAQs on your site — written the way customers actually ask the question.
-

03 Be Verifiable

On Google

- Google Business Profile fully claimed and filled out.
 - NAP consistency — Name, Address, Phone identical across every directory.
 - Steady review velocity — aim for 2–4 new reviews per month, minimum.
 - Respond to every review. Yes, even the bad ones. Especially the bad ones.
 - Local schema markup on the website (your developer can do this in 30 minutes).
-

SECTION 8 · TAKE ACTION

Score Your Business — Are You In The Conversation?

Give yourself 1 point for each YES. Be honest. The point isn't the score — it's seeing exactly where you're leaking.

01. I have a Google Business Profile that is claimed, complete, and updated this quarter. YES NO
02. I post short-form video (TikTok / Reels / Shorts) at least twice a week. YES NO
03. I have a YouTube channel with at least 5 videos answering common customer questions. YES NO
04. My website loads in under 3 seconds on a phone. YES NO
05. I have an FAQ page that uses the same words my customers actually use. YES NO
06. I have at least 20 Google reviews from the last 12 months. YES NO
07. I respond to every review — positive and negative — within 7 days. YES NO
08. I have third-party mentions (local news, blog features, podcast appearances, directories). YES NO
09. When I ask ChatGPT or Perplexity to recommend a [my category] in [my city], I appear. YES NO
10. I have a written marketing plan I could hand to someone today. YES NO

SCORE INTERPRETATION

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 8–10 | In the conversation. Press your advantage and document everything. |
| 5–7 | Visible but leaky. You're losing market share to a more disciplined competitor. |
| 3–4 | Critical gap. AI is making decisions about your category without your brand. |
| 0–2 | You don't exist in the new search layer. Fix the basics this month. |

SECTION 9

Get Your Custom “Are You In The Conversation?” Audit

Want to know exactly what AI is saying about your business right now? Here's the free offer to readers of this playbook:

15-Minute Live AI Audit — Free

We run today's demo on **your** business — same way we ran it live at AU Connect. You'll see exactly what AI knows about you, what it doesn't, and what's getting your competitors recommended instead.

No pitch. No catch. Just the data.

HOW TO BOOK

Web	otbsocialmediastl.com
Email	matt@otbsocialmedia.com
Phone	636-253-1387
LinkedIn / Social	@OTBsocialmedia

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- Exploding Topics** — TikTok demographics 2026 · <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>
- Statista** — Instagram US age distribution · <https://www.statista.com/statistics/398166/us-instagram-user-age-distribution/>
- eMarketer** — YouTube demographics 2026 · <https://www.emarketer.com/content/youtube-demographics-2026>
- Hootsuite** — Facebook demographics · <https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-demographics/>
- Meet-Lea** — LinkedIn demographics · <https://meet-lea.com/en/blog/linkedin-user-demographics>
- Retail Dive / ICSC** — Gen Z social media purchase influence · <https://www.retaildive.com/news/generation-z-social-media-influence-shopping-behavior-purchases-tiktok-instagram/652576/>
- Adobe / ALM Corp** — Gen Z TikTok search behavior · <https://almcorp.com/blog/gen-z-tiktok-google-preference-drop-2026-data/>
- TechCrunch** — ChatGPT 900M weekly users · <https://techcrunch.com/2026/02/27/chatgpt-reaches-900m-weekly-active-users/>
- Eight Oh Two** — 2026 AI Search Behavior Study · <https://eighthotwo.com/blog/2026-ai-search-behavior-study-ai-now-first-stop-for-search/>
- McKinsey** — AI is the new front door of the internet · <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/new-front-door-to-the-internet-winning-in-the-age-of-ai-search>
- Fortune** — Sam Altman on Gen Z and ChatGPT · <https://fortune.com/2025/05/13/openai-ceo-sam-altman-says-gen-z-millennials-use-chatgpt-like-life-adviser/>

TV Technology — DirecTV Gemini + Glance AI ·

<https://www.tvtechnology.com/news/directv-announces-major-expansion-of-interactive-features-with-glance-ai>

Ars Technica — DirecTV AI screensavers 2026 ·

<https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2025/10/directv-screensavers-will-show-ai-generated-ads-with-your-face-in-2026/>