

THE AI MOMENT OF DISCOVERY



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THE AI MOMENT OF DISCOVERY

By Chris Parsons

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Chris Parsons

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

CHRIS PARSONS

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RETAIL REWIRED

I've spent more than two decades in retail and marketing, and if there is one thing that has remained consistent, it is this: customers do not stand still. They evolve, they adapt, and they change how they make decisions faster than most businesses are prepared for. Retail is not just about the transaction; it is about the journey that leads to it. If we lose sight of how that journey begins, we lose the ability to influence the outcome.

There was a time when everything came down to the moment in store. The shelf, the display, and the decision made right in front of the product. Procter & Gamble defined this as the First Moment of Truth. It reshaped how brands thought about physical retail. Placement, packaging, and presence became critical because that was where the decision happened. You won by being the most visible option at the point of purchase.

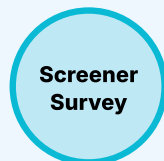
Then came a shift that moved influence earlier in the journey. Customers began doing their home-

work before they ever walked into a store. They searched, compared, read reviews, and built confidence ahead of time. Google captured this behavior with the Zero Moment of Truth. It fundamentally changed how we approached digital presence, content, and discoverability. The goal was to be findable in a world of infinite search results.

These ideas did not just describe behavior; they reshaped how organizations operated. They gave us a clearer understanding of how customers move from curiosity to confidence.

The insights shared in this framework are grounded in exclusive, real-time consumer data provided by Caddle in partnership with the Retail Council of Canada (RCC). Their February 2026 report, *Growing AI Influence in Shopping*, provided the foundation for the trends and shifts explored in these chapters. Their data allows us to see not just what people say they will do, but how they are actually behaving right now.

8,768
Representative
randomized sample of
Canadian shoppers



1,153
Used AI for purchase
decisions in the past
6 months

Caddle, in partnership with the Retail Council of Canada (RCC), surveyed Canadians to understand how shoppers use AI tools in purchase decisions. All data is owned by Caddle. Surveys were self-commissioned and paid for by Caddle, Inc.

But something has changed again.

This time, the shift is not just about when discovery happens; it is about how it happens. Customers are no longer just searching; they are asking. They are not asking for products or categories; they are asking for direction.

“I’m going to an outdoor event. What should I wear?”

“I need to upgrade my kitchen. Where do I start?”

“What’s the best option for my situation?”

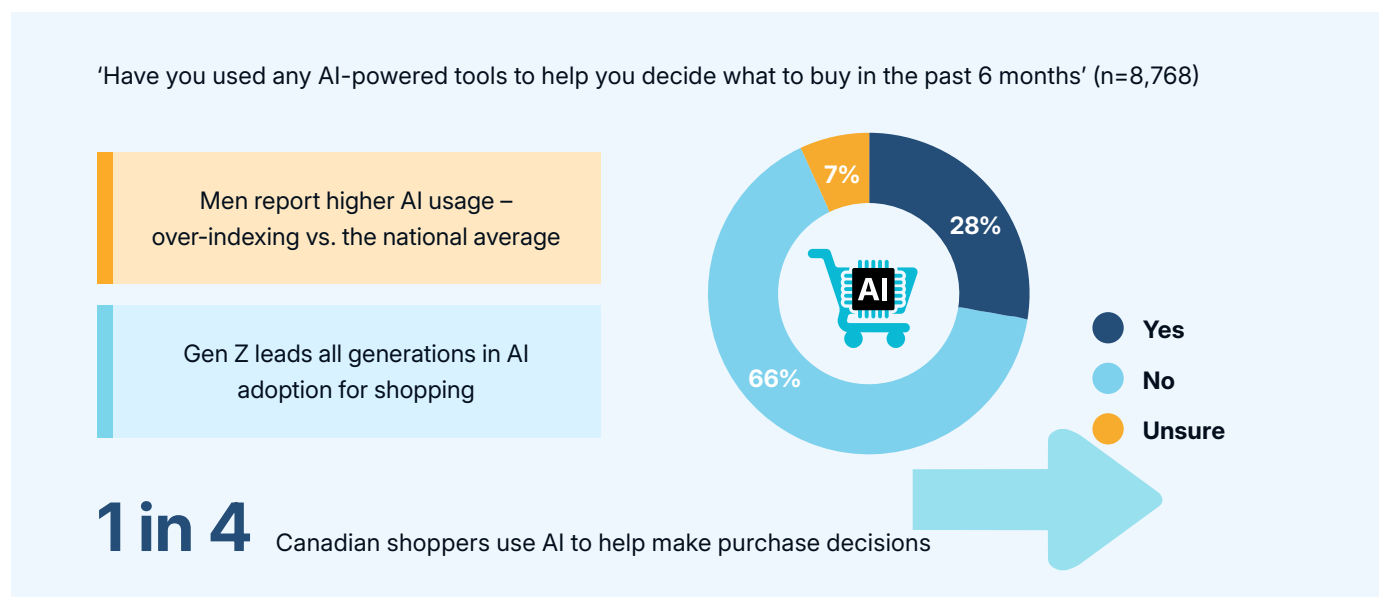
These are not traditional searches. They are moments of discovery. Increasingly, those moments are being guided by AI. This does not remove choice or exploration, but it changes the starting point. Instead of beginning with a list of options, customers are beginning with a point of view. Instead of assembling information themselves, they are refining what has already been suggested.

And increasingly, that refinement is happening within a narrower set of options. Shoppers are beginning with direction that has already filtered the landscape, reducing the need to explore broadly and shifting discovery from exploration to selection much earlier in the journey. This leads us to a new reality. We are no longer speaking to one audience; we are speaking to two. We speak to the customer, who ultimately chooses, and the systems that influence what gets considered. If those systems cannot interpret your brand, they cannot recommend it.

That shift is subtle but incredibly important. What gets introduced early gets considered. What gets considered gets chosen. This is what I call the AI Moment of Discovery.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

- **Scale of the Shift:** Over 1 in 4 Canadian shoppers (28%) now use AI to help make purchase decisions.
- **Adoption Leaders:** Usage is currently led by Men and Gen Z.
- **The Habit Loop:** 85% of shoppers report using AI at least sometimes in their purchase journey, and 40% are already using it regularly across most or all purchases. What starts as assistance quickly becomes habit.



I often hear pushback from executives who suggest that 28 percent is a small percentage of the total market. They argue that they can afford to wait until the majority arrives. This is a dangerous misunderstanding of how behavior shifts. By the time this behavior reaches 60 percent, the AI models will already be trained on which brands are the “right” answers. If you wait for the majority, you will find yourself excluded from the system entirely.

The question is no longer “Can customers find you?”

The question is “Will you be part of the discovery that guides them?”

**DISCOVERY
HAS
CHANGED**

01

CHAPTER 1

DISCOVERY HAS CHANGED

“When customers need something today, they don’t just search for it. They describe their situation, ask for guidance, and expect a clear place to start. The brands that show up in that moment don’t just get seen. They shape the decision.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

Every so often, something shifts in a way that does not feel dramatic at first. There is no announcement, no clear line in the sand, and nothing that signals a fundamental change is underway. But over time, you begin to notice it. The way customers behave feels different. The way decisions are made becomes less predictable. The patterns you have relied on for years still exist, but they no longer fully explain what is happening.

Eventually, it becomes clear. The old way has not disappeared, but it is no longer where things begin. For years, discovery followed a familiar path. A customer had a need, searched for information, and began the process of comparing and evaluating options. They opened multiple tabs, read reviews, explored products, and slowly built confidence before making a decision. This behavior was enabled by access. Search gave customers the ability to find information on their own terms. For a long time, that defined how discovery worked.

Today, that same moment often begins differently.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

AI now accounts for 13% of how shoppers discover products. This places it on par with traditional channels like retailer websites and flyers, and it is quickly closing the gap with search itself. This is no longer emerging behavior; it is already embedded in how discovery happens.

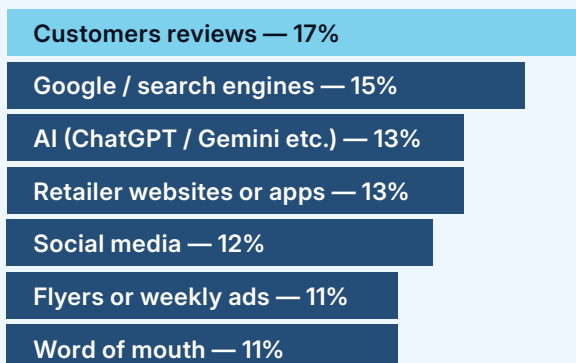


13% of discoveries involve AI

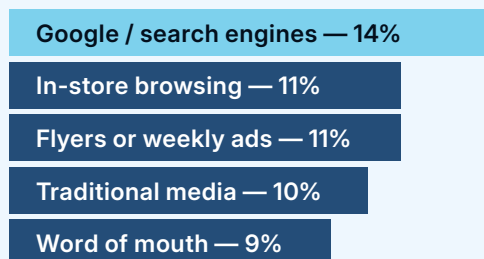
— close to flyers and in-store. AI also increases reliance on reviews

Research & Discovery AI's Influence On How Canadians Shop

How Shoppers Discover Products (n=1,153)



What AI Is Replacing (n=1,153)



AI ranks #3 in discovery: tied with retailer apps and just behind Google. It is no longer a niche tool.

Consider the high stakes purchase of a new television. In the search era, a customer would start with a fragmented hunt: “best 65 inch OLED TV.” They would manually bridge the gap between technical spec sheets, professional bench tests on tech blogs, and real world longevity threads on Reddit. The customer was the general contractor of their own data, assembling a case for a specific model over several days. They had to understand nits, refresh rates, and panel types just to make a shortlist.

In the AI Moment of Discovery, that same customer asks: “I have a bright living room with lots of windows and I mostly watch sports. What is the best TV that will not have glare issues?”

The AI does not just give them a list of links; it provides a conclusion. It synthesizes the technical specs, performance reviews of anti-reflective coatings, and user feedback into a single recommendation: “The Samsung Neo QLED is your best bet because its high peak brightness and anti-glare layer handle direct sunlight better than an OLED.” Discovery has moved from a fragmented hunt to a guided arrival.

Instead of searching in pieces, you describe the situation. You ask, “I’m going to an outdoor event and want to look casual but still put together. What should I wear?” That question captures context, intent, and outcome all at once. The response reflects that shift. Instead of links, you receive a point of view. You get a recommended direction. You get a structured starting point.

You can still explore and validate, but you are no longer starting from zero. You are starting from guidance. This is the shift. Search is built on keywords, which are fragmented and incomplete. Asking is built on context, which reflects a full situation. When discovery moves from keywords to context, it also moves from fragments to direction. That changes how decisions begin.

And customers are not just experimenting with this behavior; they are embracing it. Caddle and RCC data shows that 73% of shoppers already rate AI as helpful in making purchase decisions, showing that trust is forming alongside usage. In a search-driven world, customers build their own starting point. In a discovery-driven world, that starting point is provided.



Helpfulness Rating

73% overall rate AI helpful for purchase decisions

This matters because the moment a recommendation is introduced, the path begins to narrow. This leads us to what I call **The Law of Early Consideration**: What gets introduced early gets considered. What gets considered gets chosen more often than anything else.

AI is accelerating this law. We see that 14% of shoppers are already using AI instead of search engines, and 11% are using it in place of in-store browsing. The journey is not just shifting; it is compressing.

Retail Rewired Perspective

Stop auditing your keywords and start auditing your situations. If your landing pages, reviews, and blog articles are not working together to solve a specific situational problem like “the bright room dilemma,” an AI will not be able to synthesize your brand into a recommendation. You are not just competing for a click; you are competing to be the logical conclusion of a conversation.

To understand why this shift matters, we need to rethink the model itself.

THE NEW DISCOVERY MODEL

02

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW DISCOVERY MODEL

“Customers don’t want more options. They want a clear place to start. The brands that provide that starting point shape everything that follows.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

For years, we have relied on models to help us understand how customers make decisions. These models have shaped how we build strategies, how we measure success, and how we think about influence. They give structure to something that can otherwise feel unpredictable.

At first, the model was relatively simple. A customer experienced a stimulus, encountered a product at the shelf, and made a decision. That moment represented the point where everything came together. Over time, that model expanded. Customers began researching before purchase, and influence moved earlier in the journey. The introduction of the Zero Moment of Truth gave us a clearer understanding of how research, content, and comparison shape decisions.

But behavior has continued to evolve. Today, customers are no longer beginning with search. They are beginning with a question. They describe their situation and expect a clear place to start. This is where the model changes.

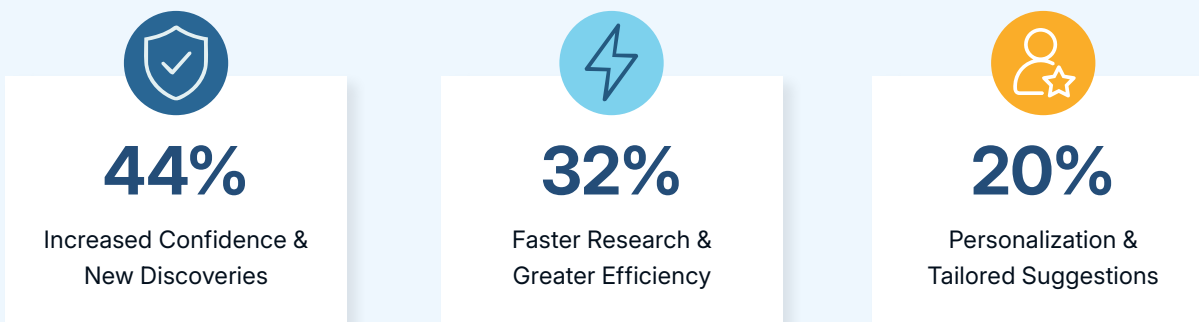
Think about a major kitchen renovation. Previously, this journey was a “linear struggle.” A customer researched countertop materials, then

farmhouse sinks, then local installers. Each was a separate, high-friction step in a weeks-long funnel. They had to reconcile the aesthetics of the stone with the plumbing requirements of the sink on their own.

Today, discovery is compressed. A user prompts an AI: “I want a modern kitchen renovation with sustainable materials that fits a 30,000 dollar budget and a narrow layout. Show me a plan.” The AI instantly pulls together a cohesive vision. It suggests recycled glass counters, specific space-saving appliances, and a streamlined workflow. The customer is no longer building a plan; they are validating a vision delivered to them in seconds. The brand that was part of that sustainable vision has won before the customer even searched for a specific SKU.

And this shift is not just about speed; it is about confidence. Customers are increasingly relying on AI to simplify complex decisions, using it to compare options and feel more certain about what to choose before they ever begin traditional research. 44% of shoppers say AI increases their confidence and helps them discover new options they would not have found otherwise.

AI Changes How Canadians Shop



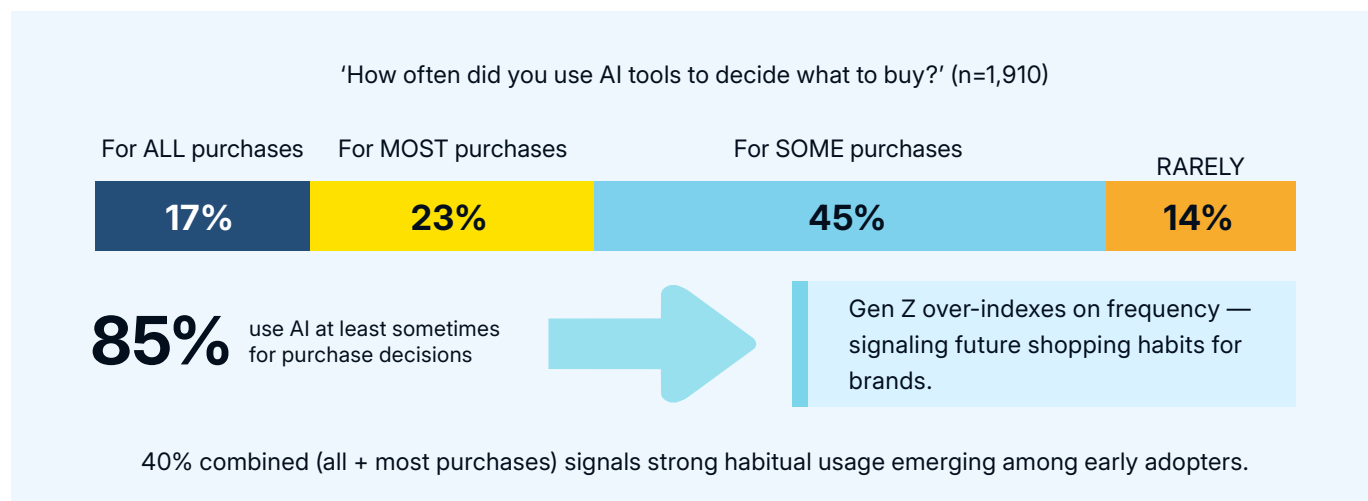
The journey still begins with a trigger, but it now moves into a moment where discovery is shaped by AI. Customers receive direction before they begin validating. They refine rather than assemble. This is **The Law of Early Consideration** in action. The experience still matters, and the outcome still feeds future behavior. But the structure of the journey has shifted.

Retail Rewired Perspective

Your traditional marketing funnel is too slow for an AI-driven world. If you are waiting for a customer to move from awareness to consideration, you have already lost. You must position your brand to be the starting point of the vision. This requires a fundamental rewire of how you structure your data by moving from a product catalog to a solution ecosystem.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

Behavior is becoming habitual. 40% of AI users report using these tools regularly across most or all of their purchases. When a tool moves from a novelty to a habit, it becomes the new standard for how decisions are made.



While shoppers may still validate their decisions, what is becoming clear is that discovery is no longer a step in the journey. It is shaping the journey from the very beginning. What starts as a tool quickly becomes part of how decisions are made. The journey is no longer built step by step. It is shaped from the beginning.

But this model did not appear overnight;
it is part of a longer evolution.

THE EVOLUTION OF DISCOVERY

03

CHAPTER 3

THE EVOLUTION OF DISCOVERY

“Every shift in customer behavior builds on what came before it. The brands that understand this don’t chase change. They recognize it, adapt to it, and move forward with it.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

To understand what is happening today, it helps to step back and look at how we got here. The way customers discover, evaluate, and make decisions has never been fixed. It has evolved over time, shaped by access to information, changes in technology, and shifts in behavior. Each stage has added something new, expanding how we think about influence and where decisions are made.

The AI Moment of Discovery is not an isolated idea. It is part of that progression.

The **automotive journey** is perhaps the best example of this evolution. In the First Moment of Truth, it was about the shiny car on the showroom floor. In the Zero Moment of Truth, it was about the Price and Build tool on your website and the three different YouTube reviews the customer watched.

But in the AI Moment of Discovery, a young family asks: “We are moving to a snowy climate, have two toddlers, and want the highest safety rating with a low monthly payment. What should we buy?”

The AI synthesizes safety data, regional climate performance reviews, and current lease offers. It recommends a specific AWD SUV before the family

ever thinks to search for your brand. Influence has moved from the Research Phase to the Intent Phase.

If we go back to the beginning, the moment of decision was physical. Customers walked into a store, approached a shelf, and made a choice based on what was in front of them. The environment mattered. Packaging mattered. Placement mattered. But the decision itself happened in that moment. Procter & Gamble defined this as the First Moment of Truth. It focused attention on the point of purchase and helped businesses understand that being present and compelling in that moment mattered more than anything else.

As access to information expanded, that model evolved. Customers no longer arrived at the shelf without context. They came prepared. They had already explored options, compared products, and formed opinions. Google defined this as the Zero Moment of Truth. This shifted influence earlier into research.

What is important to recognize is that this behavior has not disappeared. The majority of customers still research before making a purchase. What is changing is how that research begins and how much

of it is being done for them.

Today, discovery is evolving again. Customers are not just gathering information. They are asking for direction. They are starting with context, not keywords. They are beginning with a point of view. This is the AI Moment of Discovery. And increasingly, that starting point is being shaped by AI before traditional search even begins. A growing number of shoppers are now turning to AI tools as part of their early discovery process, shifting influence even further forward in the journey.

Executives who dismiss this shift because they believe the percentage of users is still small are making a classic historical error. In 2011, many leaders argued that mobile commerce was a niche behavior because only a small percentage were buying on their phones. They focused on the total percentage and ignored the velocity.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

AI is not replacing traditional behaviors like search and research, but it is moving in front of them. 72% of shoppers say they are likely to use AI regularly for product research and discovery in the future. Intent to adopt is nearly triple the current usage rate.

72% are likely to use AI regularly for research and discovery in the future

36% Extremely Likely + 36% Very Likely

Males and Gen Z over-index on high future intent.

Source: Caddle & Retail Council of Canada, February 2026. n=8,768 screener, n=1,153 qualified AI users.

Each shift has moved influence earlier. It has moved from shelf, to search, and now to guided discovery. Each shift builds on the one before it. This is not a replacement. It is an evolution. Understanding that evolution is what allows brands to adapt.

Retail Rewired Perspective

History shows that brands that wait and see during these shifts are eventually erased. In 2011, brands that ignored search went dark. Today, brands that ignore Guided Discovery are becoming invisible. The step forward is not more content; it is more context. You need to ensure the signals your brand sends into the digital world are clear enough for an AI to interpret and trust as the right answer for a family's specific life change.

And once you start looking for it, you see it everywhere.

**DISCOVERY
IS ALL
AROUND
US**

04

CHAPTER 4

DISCOVERY IS ALL AROUND US

“The biggest shifts in behavior don’t happen in boardrooms. They happen in everyday moments, when people realize there’s a faster, easier way to get to an answer.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

If you want to understand how discovery has changed, you do not need to look at a report or a trend line. You can see it in the way people go about their everyday lives. The shift is not theoretical. It is already here, showing up in small, practical moments that represent a much larger change in how decisions are being made.

Consider a situation every pet owner has faced: **a sudden health concern**. If your dog develops a mysterious rash on its belly after a long walk, your first instinct is to find a solution immediately.

In the search era, you would likely go to a pet-specific site or type “dog rash after walk in grass” into Google. From there, the manual hunt would begin. You would click through three different articles about allergies, browse a forum where other owners shared conflicting advice, and perhaps watch a video on how to apply a topical cream. You would be looking at fragments of information, trying to decide if you need a vet visit or a specific product from a pet store.

In the AI Moment of Discovery, that search changes fundamentally. You ask an AI: “My dog has a red, bumpy rash on his belly after walking in

tall grass. What could it be and what should I use to soothe it right now?”

The AI does not just provide a list of links. It synthesizes the most likely causes, such as contact dermatitis or pollen allergies, and provides immediate direction. It suggests rinsing the area with cool water and recommends specific soothing shampoos or hydrocortisone sprays that are safe for pets. You are not just getting information; you are getting a synthesized plan of action before you even reach a retail landing page. The brand that the AI recommends in that moment is the one that has already won the journey.

One of the other clearest ways to see this shift is in something as simple as **planning a road trip**. Not that long ago, this was a process that required multiple steps and a fair amount of effort. You would start by opening a map or typing a destination into Google Maps just to understand how far you were going. From there, you would estimate how many hours it would take. That would lead you to identify a city somewhere along the route where it made sense to stop.

Once you had that, the next phase began. You

would search for hotels in that city, open several options, compare prices, read reviews, and try to determine which one felt like the best choice. Then you might run a separate search to see what restaurants were nearby. Each step required a new search. Each search required a new decision. Slowly, piece by piece, you built your plan.

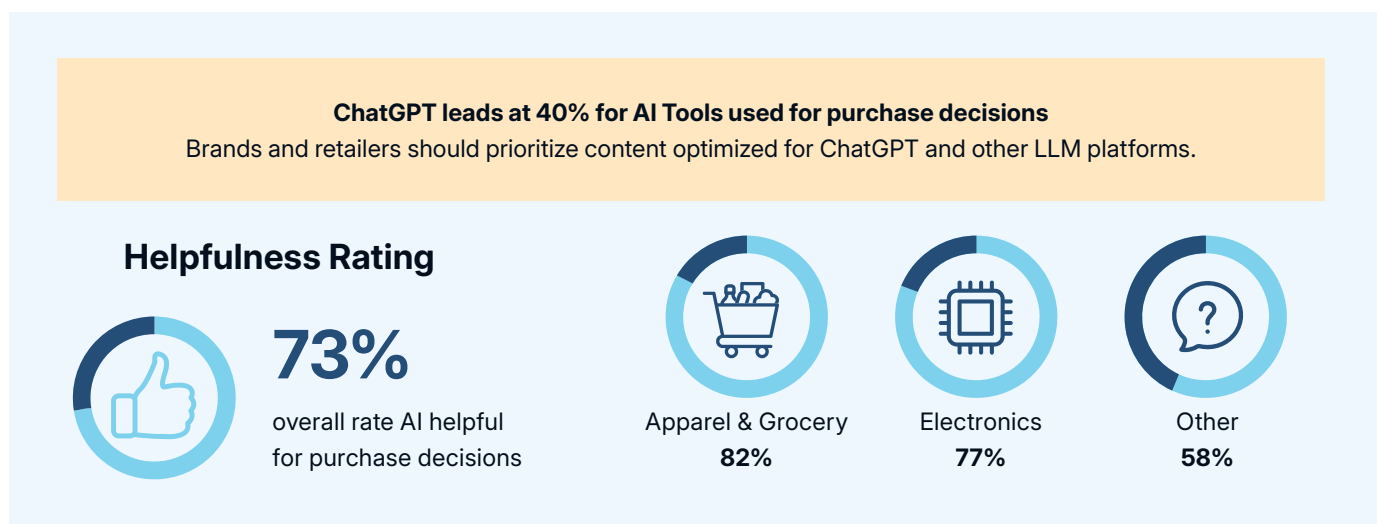
Today, that same experience often begins in a completely different way. Instead of starting with distance and working forward, you start with context. You describe what you are trying to do, what matters to you, and what kind of experience you want to have. You might say, “I’m driving from Toronto to Chicago, I want to do it over two days, stop somewhere interesting along the way, and find a great place to stay with good food nearby.” In a single moment, the entire trip begins to take shape.

You are given a suggested route, a recommended stopover city, options for where to stay, and places to eat. What once required multiple searches is now presented as a structured starting point. You can still adjust it, but you are no longer starting from zero. That is the shift.

The process itself has not disappeared, but it has been compressed and reorganized. Once you start to recognize this pattern, you begin to see it everywhere. Think about how people **plan meals** today. It used to involve searching for recipes and ingredients. Now, people describe what they want and what they have available, and they receive a complete plan almost instantly.

The same thing is happening in **shopping**. Customers used to begin with categories, searching for things like “running shoes.” Today, they are more likely to start with a situation. They explain how they plan to use a product and what matters most to them. Discovery used to require effort. Customers had to assemble information themselves. That process gave them control, but it also created friction. Today, much of that work is happening earlier in the journey. The starting point is no longer a blank page, but a recommendation that reflects the customer’s intent.

And this shift is resonating with customers. According to Caddle and RCC research, **73% of shoppers already rate AI as helpful in making purchase decisions**, reinforcing that people are not just using AI; they are valuing the direction it provides. When customers are given a strong starting point, the number of options they consider begins to narrow. They are no longer exploring everything that exists. They are exploring what has already been surfaced.



[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

AI-driven discovery is not limited to one category. It is already influencing decisions across multiple areas, including electronics (77% helpfulness), grocery (81% helpfulness), and apparel (82% helpfulness). This signals that the shift is not niche; it is becoming a normalized behavior across everyday shopping experience.

What this shows is that discovery is no longer tied to a single type of purchase or level of complexity. It is happening in everyday decisions. It is happening in urgent moments. And it is happening across categories that were once driven by completely different behaviors. Discovery has not disappeared. Search still matters. But the journey is no longer starting where it used to. It is starting with guidance.

But this shift goes beyond convenience; it changes the very signals we use to measure success.

THE MEASUREMENT GAP

05

CHAPTER 5

THE MEASUREMENT GAP

“Traditional retail KPIs tell you what happened on your site. They no longer tell you why the customer arrived there in the first place.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

For years, one of the biggest shifts in customer behavior came from access to information. Reviews, ratings, and videos gave customers the ability to explore products in a way that had never been possible before. Decisions were shaped by what other customers experienced and shared. This was a defining part of the Zero Moment of Truth.

But as the volume of information increased, something else happened. The effort required to make sense of that information grew alongside it. Today, customers are delegating that effort to AI. This creates a massive **Measurement Gap** for retail leaders. Your traditional site and store KPIs are now missing the most important part of the story.

Consider **site traffic and time-on-site**. You might see an increase in traffic but a significant drop in “time-on-site.” In the old model, this looked like a failure of engagement. You would assume the customer arrived, did not like what they saw, and bounced. In the AI era, this is often a sign of high-intent success. The customer arrived via an AI recommendation that already told them exactly what to buy. They did not need to “browse” or “hunt”; they came to transact. If you are only measuring tradi-

tional engagement, you may misinterpret your best customers as your least interested ones.

Conversely, you might be losing traffic entirely because your brand is not showing up in the “synthesized direction” provided by AI. If you are not in the recommendation, the journey ends before it ever hits your site analytics. Your dashboard says traffic is down, but it will not tell you that you were filtered out of the discovery moment altogether.

Finally, look at **basket size**. We are seeing higher basket sizes not necessarily because of better on-site merchandising, but because customers are arriving with a “complete solution” recommended by AI. When a shopper asks for a “complete camping kit for a family of four,” the AI recommends the tent, the sleeping bags, and the stove in one go. They are not missing the accessories because the AI did not forget them.

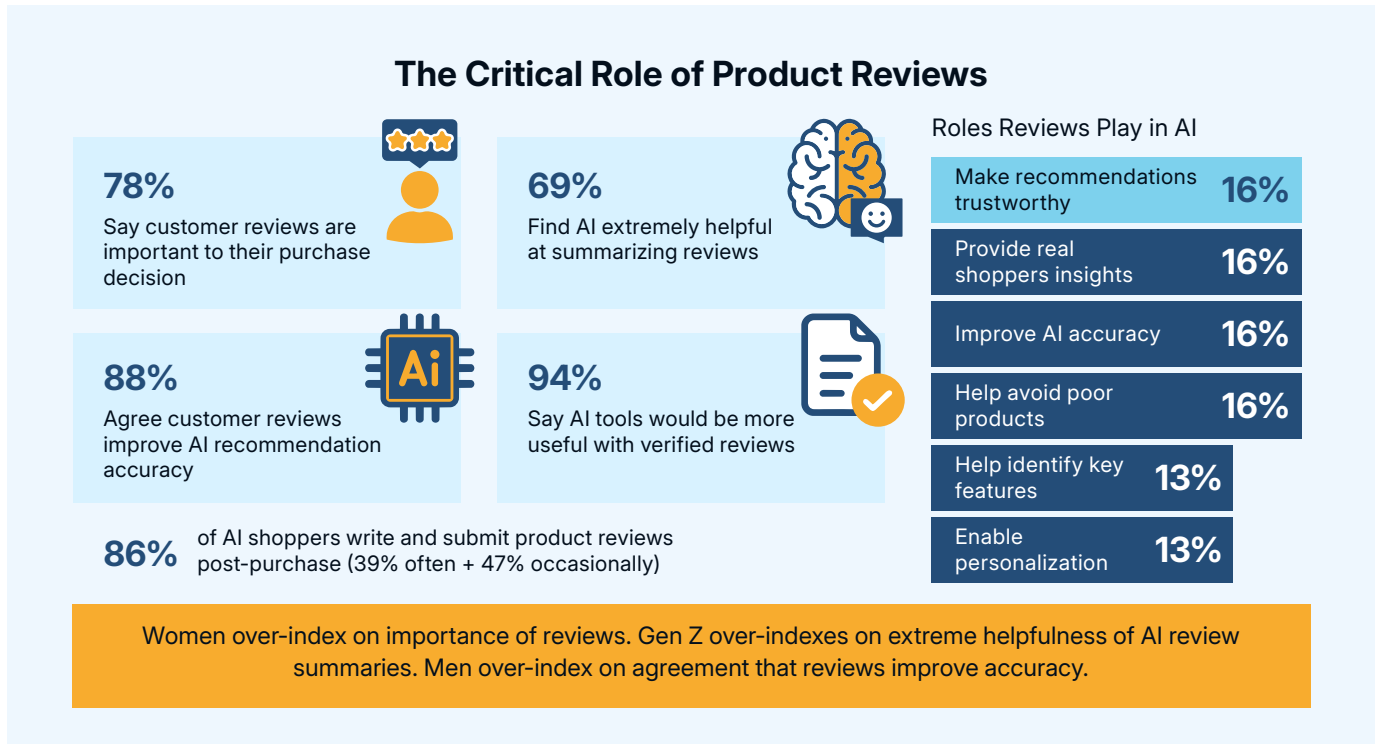
There is also a deeper gap: **Price Confidence**. Caddle’s research revealed that only 15 percent of shoppers feel very confident they are getting the best price. This lack of confidence is why they are turning to AI. They are looking for a neutral refiner to validate that they are not being misled by tradition-

al retail signals.

So the customer does the work of interpretation via the tool. Today, customers are no longer just consuming information; they are receiving direction. And they trust how AI handles this data.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

78% of shoppers say reviews are vital to their purchase decisions, and 69% find AI-generated summaries of those reviews helpful. This reinforces that trust is not being removed from the process; it is being interpreted and delivered in a more accessible way.



Consistency now matters more than ever. It is not just about having a high volume of reviews; it is about what those reviews consistently say. AI is not counting feedback; it is interpreting patterns. Those patterns are what shape recommendations.

Retail Rewired Perspective

Your dashboard is lying to you. If you are not measuring “Recommendation Inclusion”—how often AI models recommend your brand for specific situations—you are flying blind. You need to stop measuring clicks and start measuring inclusion in the synthesized direction.

When the metrics change, the entire strategy must change with them. Because what you are measuring today is no longer capturing where influence begins. You are measuring behavior after the decision has already taken shape. That is the gap.

INFUSING THE MARKETING FLYWHEEL

06

CHAPTER 6

INFUSING THE MARKETING FLYWHEEL

“The AI Moment of Discovery is not a new channel; it is the engine that infuses every existing channel you have.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

The AI Moment of Discovery is not a tactic or a campaign. It is a foundational part of how customers now begin their journey. For a Marketer and a Marketing team, this requires a fundamental rethink of the **entire marketing ecosystem**.

In the old model, we thought of the **marketing funnel** as a linear way to “push” customers from awareness to purchase. In the AI era, we must think of an **infused flywheel**. The AI Moment of Discovery is the engine that sits at the center, informing and complementing every channel. This is where most organizations struggle, because it requires rethinking every function at once.

“AI won’t replace great marketers, but marketers who know how to use AI will replace those who don’t. And like it’s always been, the advantage doesn’t come from access to tools; it comes from how quickly you turn insight into action. AI may (or may not) create great marketing, but it certainly amplifies the quality of your thinking. Weak strategy gets exposed faster, and strong strategy scales further.”

— Johnny Russo

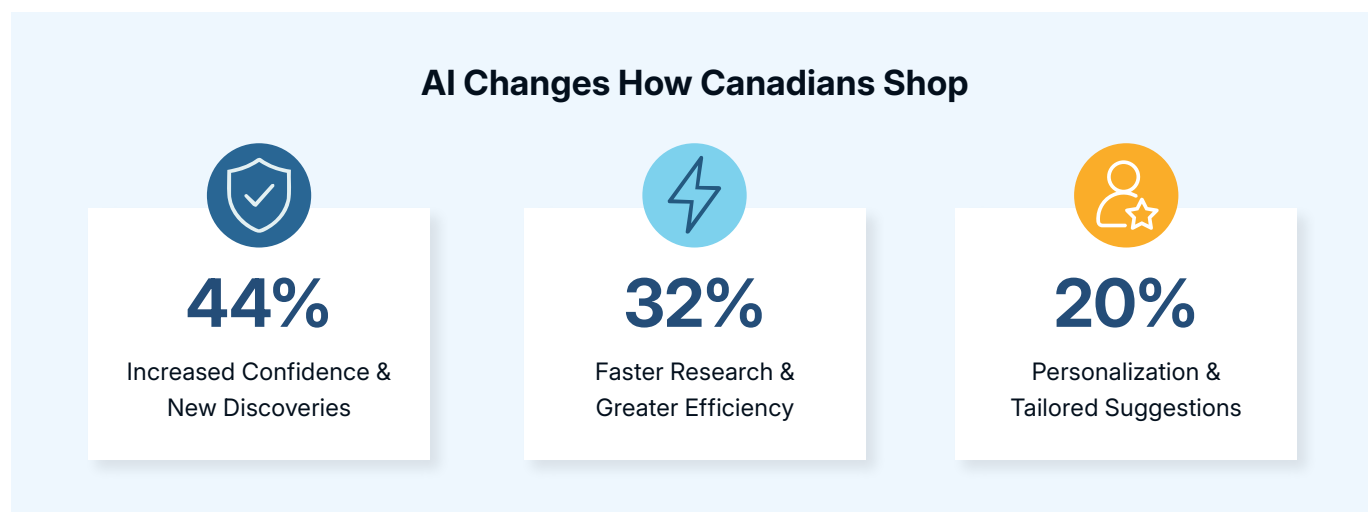
Author of Mastering Mindful Leadership and Partner at Commerce Rewired

- **SEO and Content:** Your blogs and landing pages are no longer just for “clicks”; they are the training data for the models that will recommend you. Your SEO manager is now a “Signals Architect.” Their job is to ensure your brand’s situational DNA is readable by machines.
- **Social and PR:** Your reviews and brand mentions are no longer just for shoppers to read; they are being synthesized into a single “trust score” by AI. Your social team is now a “Reputation Engine.”
- **Loyalty and CRM:** Instead of generic “category” promotions, you can now speak to the “situations” your customers are solving, using AI to predict when a Renovation Situation or a Pet Health Situation is beginning.

When discovery is at the center of your flywheel, your marketing becomes proactive rather than reactive. You are not just “showing up” in search results; you are shaping the very intent that leads a customer to those results. Behavior moves faster than our assumptions. Customers do not separate their expectations by category. They carry their behaviors with them. Once they experience a faster way to get to an answer, that expectation carries forward.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

AI is not confined to a single channel or moment. It is being used across discovery, comparison, and decision making, influencing how customers move from need to outcome across multiple categories. This reinforces that AI is not a tactic within the funnel; it is reshaping how the entire retail system operates.



The question is not whether you exist; it is whether you are included. If a customer never encounters your brand in the moment where direction is first established, everything that follows becomes significantly harder. You are trying to insert yourself into a path that has already been shaped. And that path is becoming more concentrated. As AI provides clearer starting points, customers are naturally considering fewer options, focusing on what has already been surfaced rather than exploring everything available.

Retail Rewired Perspective

Do not build an “AI Team.” Build an AI-First Marketing Strategy. Your content creators, data analysts, and brand managers all need to understand that their primary job is now creating “interpretability.” Every asset you produce should be designed to help an AI understand why your brand is the right answer for a specific human problem.

Showing up is just the beginning; the real challenge is winning the moment where direction is set.

**HOW TO
SHOW UP
IN THE
MOMENT**

07

CHAPTER 7

HOW TO SHOW UP IN THE MOMENT

“You do not win by being available everywhere. You win by being relevant at the exact moment a customer asks for direction.”

— CHRIS PARSONS

Understanding the shift is one thing. Acting on it is another.

Showing up in the AI Moment of Discovery is not about doing more; it is about doing things differently. It requires a fundamental shift from being “findable” to being “interpretable.” In the search era, showing up meant winning the keyword war. If you sold hiking gear, you fought to rank for “best hiking boots.” In the AI Moment of Discovery, the “keyword” is replaced by the “context.”

Consider a hiker preparing for the **West Coast Trail**.

In the ZMOT era, they would spend weeks searching for “waterproof boots,” “lightweight gaiters,” and “tide charts.” They would visit ten different sites, reading blogs and comparing specs manually. They were the General Contractors of their own safety.

In the AI Moment of Discovery, they ask: “I am hiking the West Coast Trail in May. It will be muddy and wet, and I have weak ankles. What is the specific footwear and sock combination that will keep me blister-free and stable?”

The AI does not just return a list of boots. It synthesizes weather data for BC in May, the terrain difficulty of the trail, and the anatomical needs

of someone with weak ankles. It then looks for a brand that has provided the “Signals” to match that exact situation. If your brand only talks about “Boots,” you will not show up. If your brand talks about “Lateral ankle support for muddy, high-impact coastal trekking,” you become the synthesized answer.

So, how do you actually show up? This is where the work becomes tactical.

1. Audit Your Situational DNA. Does your digital presence describe your products in terms of the problems they solve? Most retailers are great at listing features. AI needs more. It needs to know the utility of those features. You must audit your content to see if it answers the “When” and “Why” instead of just the “What.” If a customer asks for a solution to “soothing a rash caused by walking in tall grass,” your pet brand needs content that explicitly links your product to that exact situational trigger.

2. Standardize Your Technical Signals. AI models thrive on structured data. If your product specifications are buried in an image or an unformatted paragraph, the AI cannot “read” them. You must ensure your data is clear, consistent, and machine-readable across all platforms. You are no

longer just writing for a human; you are writing for a system that requires structure to form a recommendation.

3. The Death of the Static Article. For years, the “Blog” was a way to drive traffic. In the AI era, the article is the bridge to the outcome. Your “Top 10 Tips for a Kitchen Reno” article should not be a dead end. It needs to be deeply infused with your product data. When an AI “reads” your advice, it should see a direct connection between the advice given and the SKU that fulfills it. If you recommend a specific lighting layout for a “dark kitchen,” the AI should instantly pull the exact lighting SKUs that fit that description.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

Customers are willing to help you show up. 67% of shoppers are comfortable sharing preferences for tailored recommendations, and 62% would be more likely to use AI if sharing those personal details resulted in clearly better recommendations.



Leverage Personalization With Transparency

66% are comfortable sharing preferences. But 24% cite privacy concerns. Articulate clear data benefits to sway the 62% who'd increase AI reliance with better recommendations.

62%

more likely with better
recommendations

This means “Showing Up” is no longer just about visibility; it is about being the brand that justifies the customer’s trust in sharing their data. The brands that succeed in this environment move from being a “Product Catalog” to a “Knowledge Base.” You are providing the data points that allow AI to guide the customer to a conclusion.

Retail Rewired Perspective

Stop providing overwhelming lists. In an AI driven world, the “Paradox of Choice” is solved before the customer reaches your site. Your job is to provide the “One Best Answer” that the AI and the customer are looking for. If you can’t be the specific answer to a specific situation, you will remain part of a list that no one ever clicks.

Presence is the price of entry, but the playbook for winning requires a deeper shift.

THE PLAYBOOK FOR WINNING

08

CHAPTER 8

THE PLAYBOOK FOR WINNING

*“Discovery used to be something you optimized for.
Now it’s something you design for.”*

— CHRIS PARSONS

At this point, the shift should feel real. You have seen how discovery has changed. You have seen how influence is no longer concentrated in a single moment. Instead, it is distributed across signals that come together to form direction. The natural question now is simple: What do you actually do about it?

Winning the AI Moment of Discovery does not reward volume; it rewards **relevance and clarity**. It rewards brands that understand the situations customers are trying to solve rather than just the products they are trying to sell. If discovery now begins with a question, then winning that moment starts with understanding how those questions are being asked. Customers are not saying “running shoes.” They are saying, “I am training for my first 10K and need something comfortable that will not slow me down.” They are not saying “sofa.” They are saying, “I need something durable, easy to clean, and comfortable for a family with kids.”

And this behavior is no longer niche. According to the Caddle and RCC report, over 1 in 4 Canadian shoppers already use AI to help make purchase decisions, with adoption accelerating rapidly among younger consumers.



Early Adoption at 28%, Led by Men and Gen Z

Over 1 in 4 Canadian shoppers now use AI for purchase decisions, with males and Gen Z leading adoption.

Here is your **Monday Morning To-Do List** for winning:

- **Identify your Core Situations.** Meet with your team and list the top 5 “Life Situations” where your products are the answer.
- **Map Content to those Situations.** Audit your current content. If it does not speak to real situations, it will not be synthesized by AI.

- **Retool Your Data Structure.** Move beyond category labels. Add “Use Case” metadata to your product feeds.
- **Monitor Recommendation Share.** Use AI tools to check: are you being surfaced first in your category? ChatGPT currently dominates with 40% of the market, followed by Google Gemini at 22%.
- **Design for Synthesis.** Provide the “One Best Answer” that the AI and the customer are looking for.

That is where most teams start. But if you want to build something that lasts, you need to go deeper. Here is the **Strategic Playbook** for long-term success:

Start with Situations, Not Categories.

Customers are describing needs, not browsing categories. The categorization of products is for the convenience of the retailer; the situational mapping of products is for the convenience of the customer. Mapping your business by real-world situations allows you to see how customers describe their needs and what outcomes matter most.

Align Your Brand to Real Use Cases.

Clarity wins. If AI cannot clearly associate your brand with a specific outcome, you will not show up. Your brand needs to be the logical conclusion of a situational problem. Ensure your product descriptions, reviews, and signals across every touchpoint are consistent and clearly connected to your target use cases.

Build Signals That Feed the System.

In a search-driven world, content was something customers consumed. In a discovery-driven world, content—including reviews and behavior—becomes something that trains the system. Every review and piece of feedback contributes to how future recommendations are formed. 94% of shoppers say AI tools would be even more useful if verified reviews were integrated directly into the recommendations.

Show Up Early, Not Everywhere.

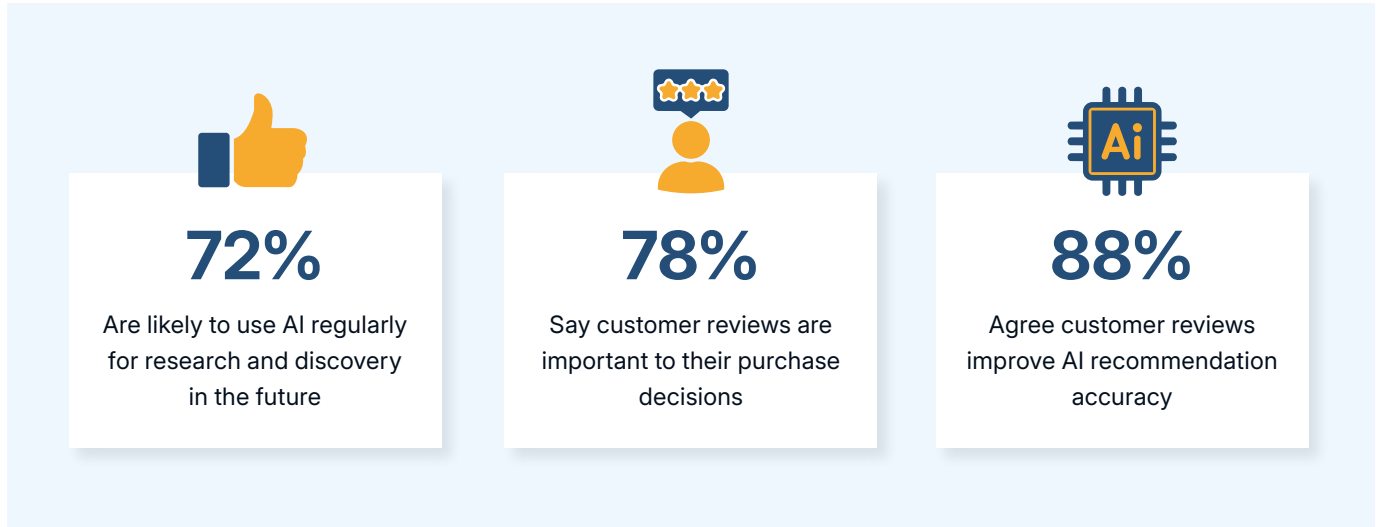
Because what gets introduced early gets considered. Maximize inclusion at the moment where discovery begins. If you are not part of the starting point, being everywhere else does not matter as much as it used to.

Design for Speed and Clarity.

The answer is formed in seconds. Your brand needs to be easy to understand, easy to interpret, and easy to include. Complexity works against you; clarity works for you. The brands that win are the ones that are easiest to synthesize in the moment that matters.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

The brands included in the initial recommendation set have a disproportionate advantage. 72% of shoppers expect to use AI regularly for discovery going forward, making early inclusion the most valuable real estate in retail. AI is not replacing the journey; it is compressing it.



There is another layer to this that cannot be ignored: **Trust**. According to the report, 78% of shoppers say reviews are critical to their decision, and 88% believe reviews improve AI recommendation accuracy. AI is not replacing trust signals; it is amplifying them.

What this reinforces is simple. The brands that win are not the ones that say the most. They are the ones that are understood the fastest. They are the ones that connect product to situation with clarity. They are the ones that provide direction, not just information.

Winning the AI Moment of Discovery is about shifting from categories to situations, from information to interpretation, and from visibility to inclusion. Remember **The Law of Early Consideration**: What gets introduced early gets considered. What gets considered gets chosen. That moment now comes first.

The brands that show up there do not just participate in the journey. They define it.

**FROM
SEARCH
TO
SYNTHESIS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FROM SEARCH TO SYNTHESIS

For more than a decade, the Zero Moment of Truth shaped how we understood digital discovery. Customers became active participants in their own journey, navigating multiple sources to build confidence before making a decision. The AI Moment of Discovery represents the next evolution. Customers are no longer assembling information themselves; they are starting with a synthesized point of view and refining from there.

And this shift is already well underway. According to research from Caddle and RCC, more than 1 in 4 shoppers are using AI to support purchase decisions today, with the majority expecting to use it regularly in the near future.

Feature	ZMOT (The Search Era)	AIMOD (The AI Era)
Primary Action	Keyword-based searching and comparing.	Context-based prompting and asking
Consumer Role	Information Assembler (Building the plan).	Outcome Refiner (Validating the plan).
Journey Path	Iterative and non-linear "Neuron" model.	Compressed and front-loaded model.
Source of Influence	Distributed across many sources.	Concentrated in initial synthesis.
Brand Goal	Be found in a list of search results.	Be included in the initial synthesized direction.

**WHAT
WINNING
LOOKS
LIKE**

THE

THE SHIFT IN PRACTICE

WHAT WINNING LOOKS LIKE

If you want to move from optimizing for search to designing for discovery, this is where to start:

- **Map Situations, Not Just Categories.** Audit your product line based on the real-world problems they solve. AI recommends solutions for situations, not just SKUs.
- **Ensure Algorithmic Clarity.** Your brand technical specs, values, and primary use cases must be structured and consistent across the web to be easily interpreted by AI models.
- **Treat Content as Training Data.** Shift your view of reviews and articles. They are no longer just for shoppers to read. They are the signals that teach AI assistants why your brand is the right recommendation.
- **Prioritize Early Inclusion.** Recognize that the shortlist is now created in seconds. If you are not part of the initial AI response, you are likely excluded from the entire journey.
- **Design for Synthesis.** Remove the friction of information overload. Provide the clear, authoritative summaries that AI tools and time-starved customers crave.

[DATA INSIGHT: Caddle in Partnership with RCC]

AI is not just influencing discovery; it is accelerating and simplifying it. 44% of shoppers say AI increases their confidence, and 32% say it makes research faster. 73% already rate AI as helpful in purchase decisions.

AI Changes How Canadians Shop



44%

Increased Confidence &
New Discoveries



32%

Faster Research &
Greater Efficiency



20%

Personalization &
Tailored Suggestions

**THE
EVOLUTION
OF THE
MOMENT**

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE MOMENT

The history of retail is a history of moving closer to the customer. The First Moment of Truth defined the shelf as the moment that mattered. The Zero Moment of Truth moved that influence earlier to the search bar. Now, we are seeing the next evolution: **The AI Moment of Discovery.**

Discovery is no longer something the customer builds step by step. It is something they begin with. A direction. A recommendation. A starting point shaped before they ever see a list of options. This shift does not replace what came before it. A strong product, a clear brand, and a great experience still matter. They always will.

But the way customers arrive at those moments has changed. The starting point is no longer a search; it is a conversation. It is a request for direction. And increasingly, that direction is being shaped before the journey even begins.

Which means the question has changed. It is no longer just, “Can customers find us?” It is, “Are we part of what guides them?”

Because the brands that show up at the beginning do not just compete for attention; they shape the decision before it is even made. In a world where discovery begins with direction, there is one truth that matters: The brands that define that direction win.

The next moment is not coming.

It is already here.

SOURCE & METHODOLOGY

SOURCE & METHODOLOGY

Primary Data Provider: Caddle in Partnership with the Retail Council of Canada (RCC).

Report Title: Growing AI Influence in Shopping: How Canadian Shoppers Use AI in Their Purchase Decisions (February 2026).

Methodology: Insights derived from a representative randomized sample of 8,768 Canadian shoppers, with a deep-dive analysis of 1,153 qualified AI users who utilized the technology for purchase decisions within the past six months.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chris is an experienced marketing leader with extensive expertise in the retail industry, having held influential roles at Home Hardware, Walmart, and other top companies. Known for his strategic insights in omnichannel marketing, Chris has effectively guided digital transformations and enhanced customer engagement strategies across various platforms. He is also deeply committed to people leadership and cultivating a culture of innovation and adaptability within teams. Chris's approach seamlessly integrates robust digital strategies with strong team dynam-

ics, offering valuable guidance for professionals navigating the evolving retail landscape.

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