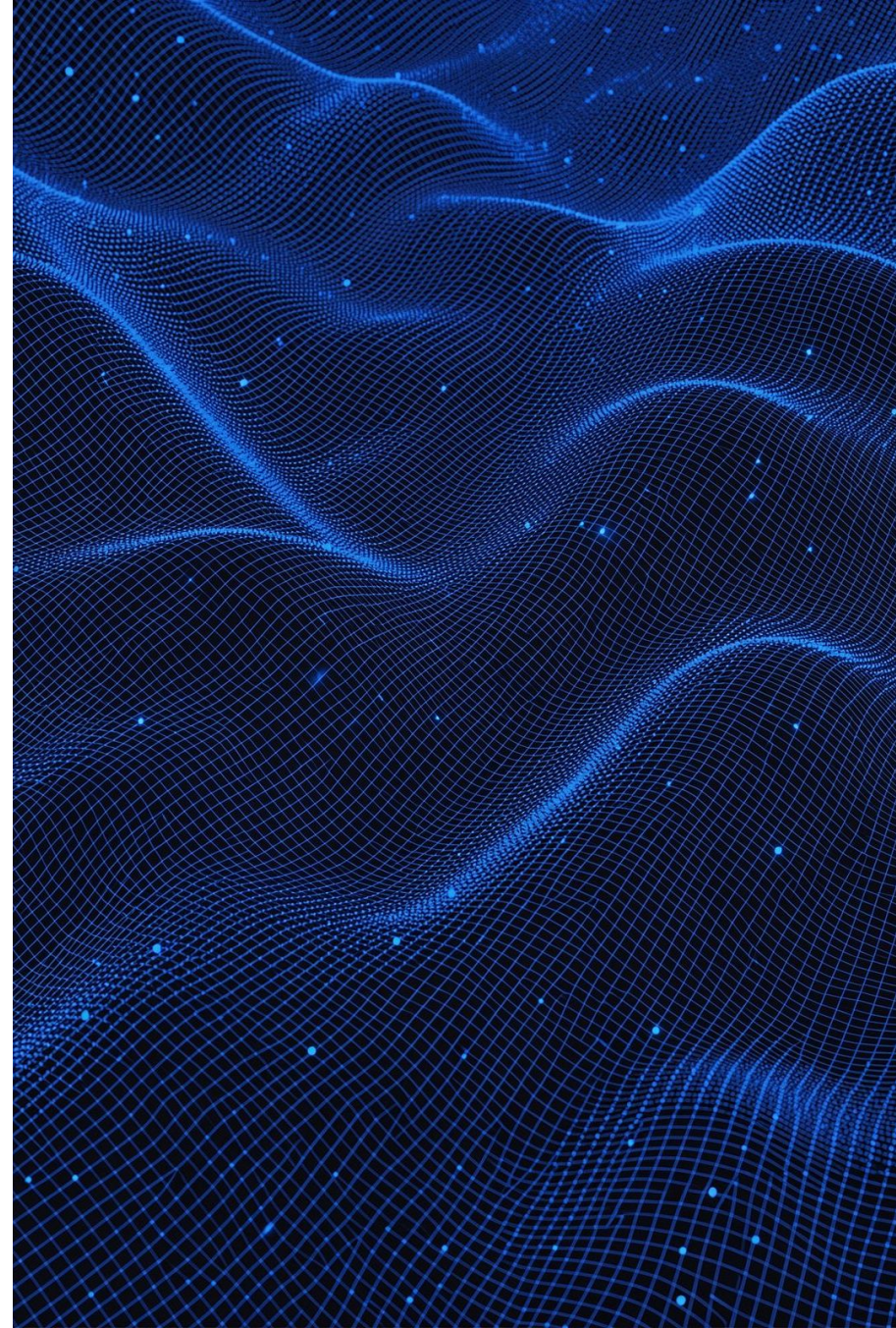


The State of Discovery 2026

How search, social, and AI, are reshaping how people discover information, products, and brands.



Executive Summary: Five Key Takeaways

Discovery has changed. People now discover information across search, social, online communities, and AI. This report explains what that means for brands.

Key Takeaways

Search happens across multiple platforms.

Google is no longer the only place people search. TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit, Instagram, and AI have become discovery engines in their own right.

Recommendation engines changed distribution.

Discovery is increasingly driven by recommendations, not follower counts.

People search differently depending on intent.

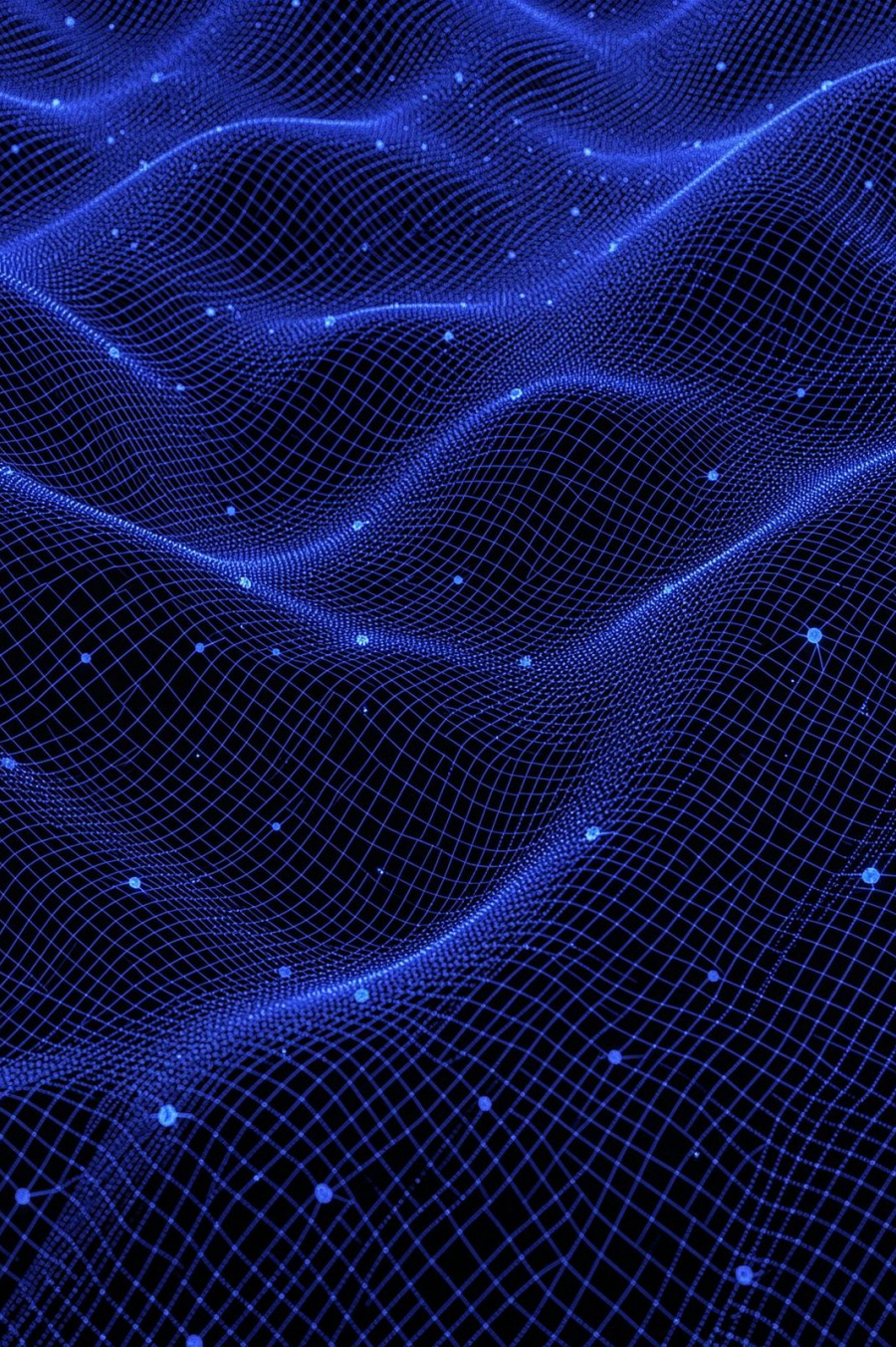
Entertainment, learning, research, and decision making happen on different platforms.

AI is changing discovery again.

More people are asking AI to find and summarize information instead of visiting multiple websites.

Creative has become a competitive advantage.

As platforms get better at finding the right audience, content has to clearly signal who it's for and why it matters.

An abstract graphic on the left side of the page, featuring a dark blue background with a glowing, wavy grid of light blue lines and dots, resembling a digital or network structure.

CHAPTER 01

Discovery Has Changed

How people discover information, products, and brands has changed dramatically over the past three decades. This chapter looks at how we got here and why it's important.

Discovery Is Everywhere Now

For decades, discovery followed a predictable path: people searched Google and visited websites, that era is over.

Social as Search

Social platforms now function as primary search engines for hundreds of millions of users.

Organic Surfacing

Algorithms surface organic content (not ads) from users, creators and brands people have never followed.

AI

Google delivers an 'AI Overview', bypassing traditional search results entirely.

Always On

Discovery is now scattered across dozens of platforms.



The Evolution of Discovery: 1990s to Today

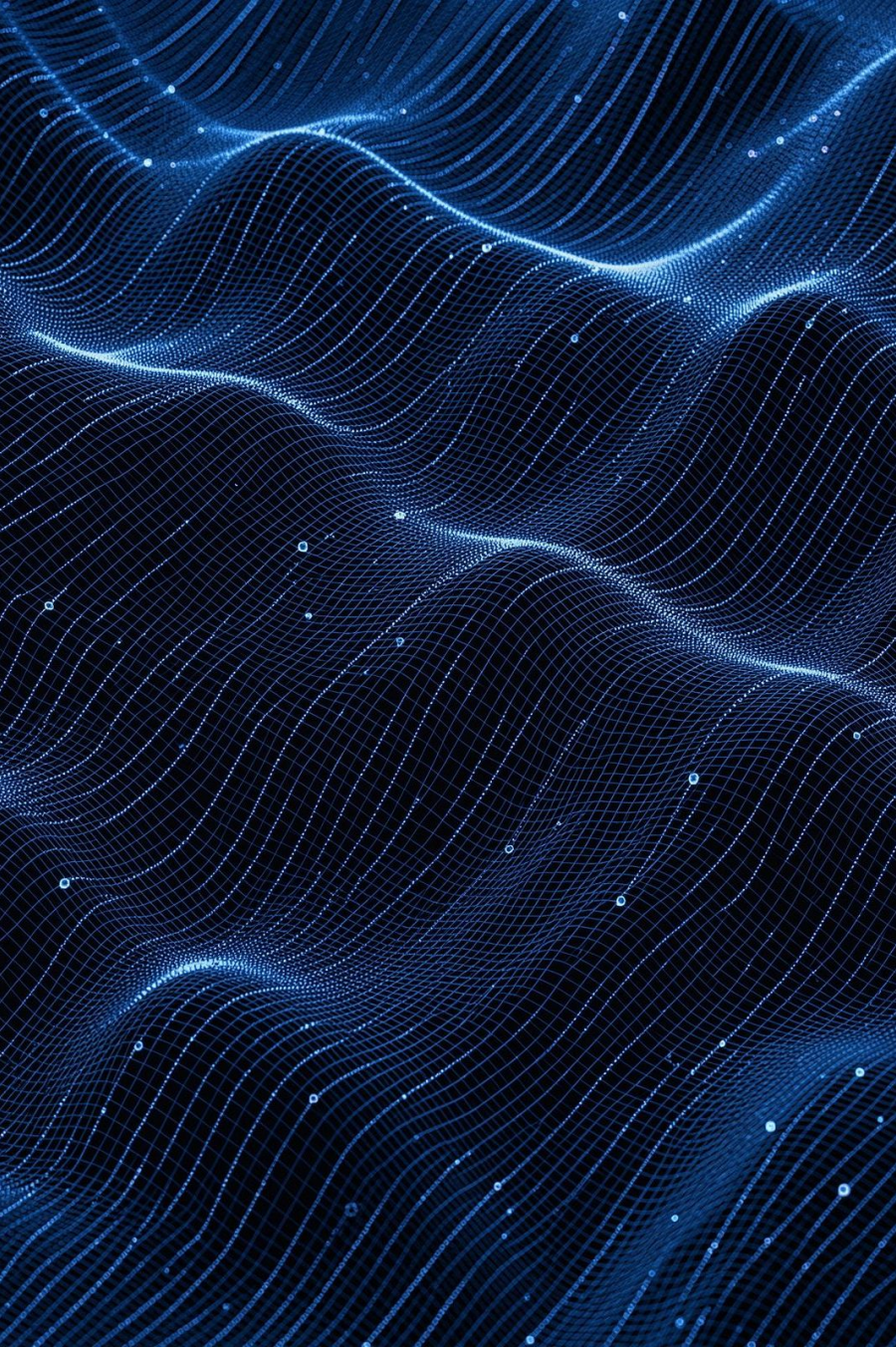
Discovery has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Each era gave people new ways to find information and forced brands to adapt.

Era	Period	How It Worked	Who Controlled It
Directories	1990s	Browsing AOL, Yahoo! Directory and early websites	Which websites were listed in directories
Search	2000s	Typing questions into Google	Google's search algorithm
Social	2010s	Seeing what friends shared	Who you follow
Recommendations	2020s	Opening your For You feed	Recommedation engines
AI	Today	Asking ChatGPT a question	No single platform or gatekeeper

ONE THING TO REMEMBER

Discovery no longer belongs to one platform

- People still search.
- They still discover through friends.
- But discovery now also happens through recommendation engines, social search and AI.
- Brands can no longer optimize for one platform and expect to be found everywhere.

An abstract graphic on the left side of the page. It features a dark blue background with a series of lighter blue, wavy, undulating lines that create a sense of depth and movement. Overlaid on these waves is a fine grid of small, light blue dots, which are more densely packed in some areas and more sparse in others, giving it a digital or data-like appearance.

CHAPTER 02

Search Is Expanding

People choose different platforms depending on what they're trying to accomplish.

Where People Search and Why

Platform	What People Are Trying To Do	Opportunity for Brands
Google	Find a specific answer or website	Capture high intent searches
AI (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude)	To get the answer quickly	Become part of AI generated answers
YouTube	Learn how to do something	Build trust through education
TikTok	Discover new ideas	Reach new audiences through recommendations
Instagram	See it before deciding	Build interest and reinforce brand perception
Pinterest	Plan something	Influence decisions before they're made
Reddit	See what other people think	Build credibility and answer questions

The Numbers Tell The Story

The shift away from Google isn't theoretical. The numbers show that discovery is happening across multiple platforms.

3.2B

TikTok Searches/Day

TikTok searches happen every day.

80B

Pinterest Searches/Month

Pinterest searches happen every month.

46%

Gen Z on Social Search

Gen Z prefers social search over traditional search engines.

80M

Reddit Searches/Week

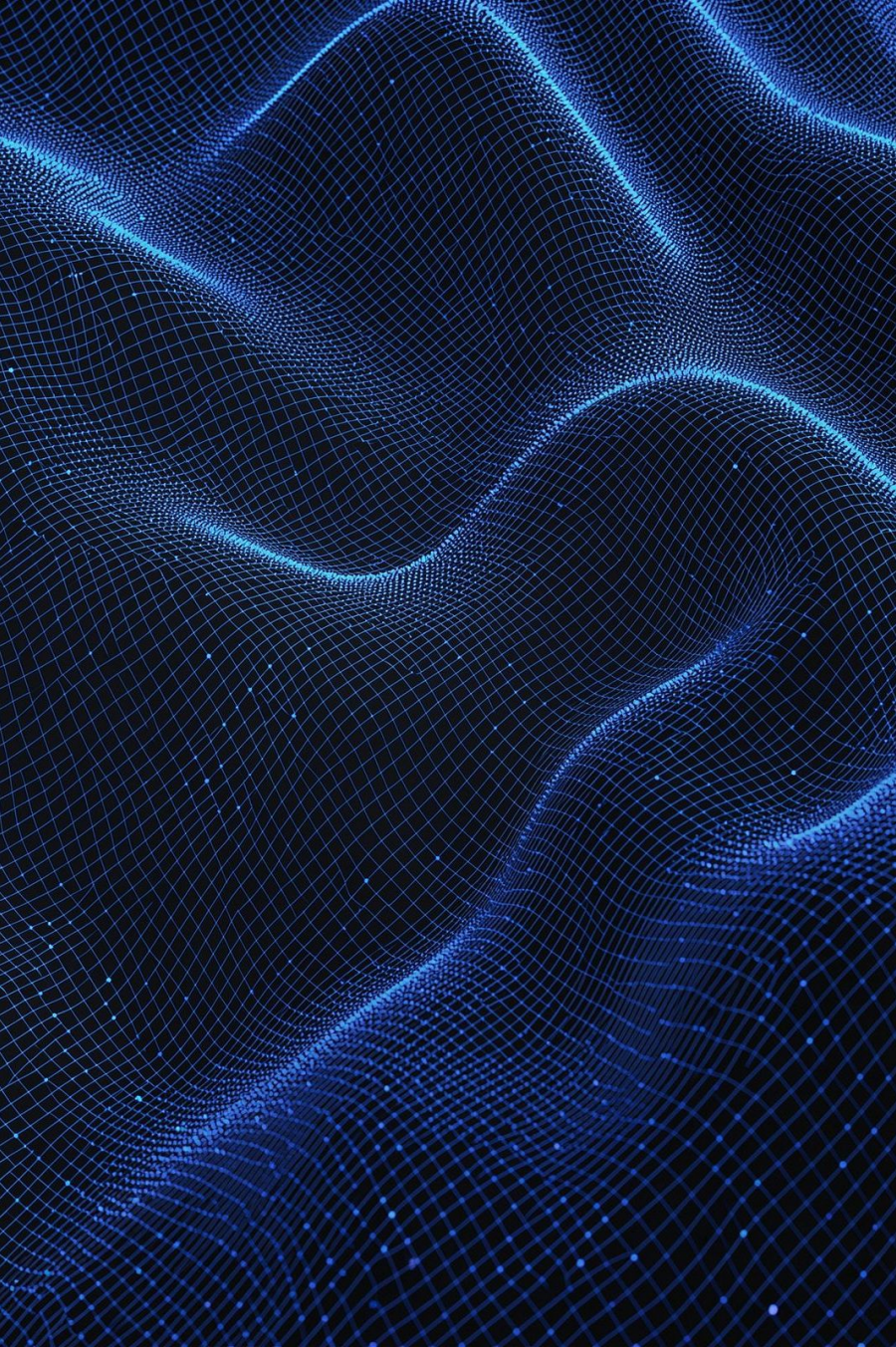
Reddit has 80 million people using its native search every week.

1B

ChatGPT Monthly Active users

People are increasingly starting research with AI

Sources: eMarketer, TikTok, Pinterest, Reuters, Reddit Q4 2025 earnings.



CHAPTER 03

Recommendation Is the New Discovery

Social platforms no longer show people content primarily because they follow an account. Today they recommend content based on interests, behavior, and engagement. That changes how brands earn attention.

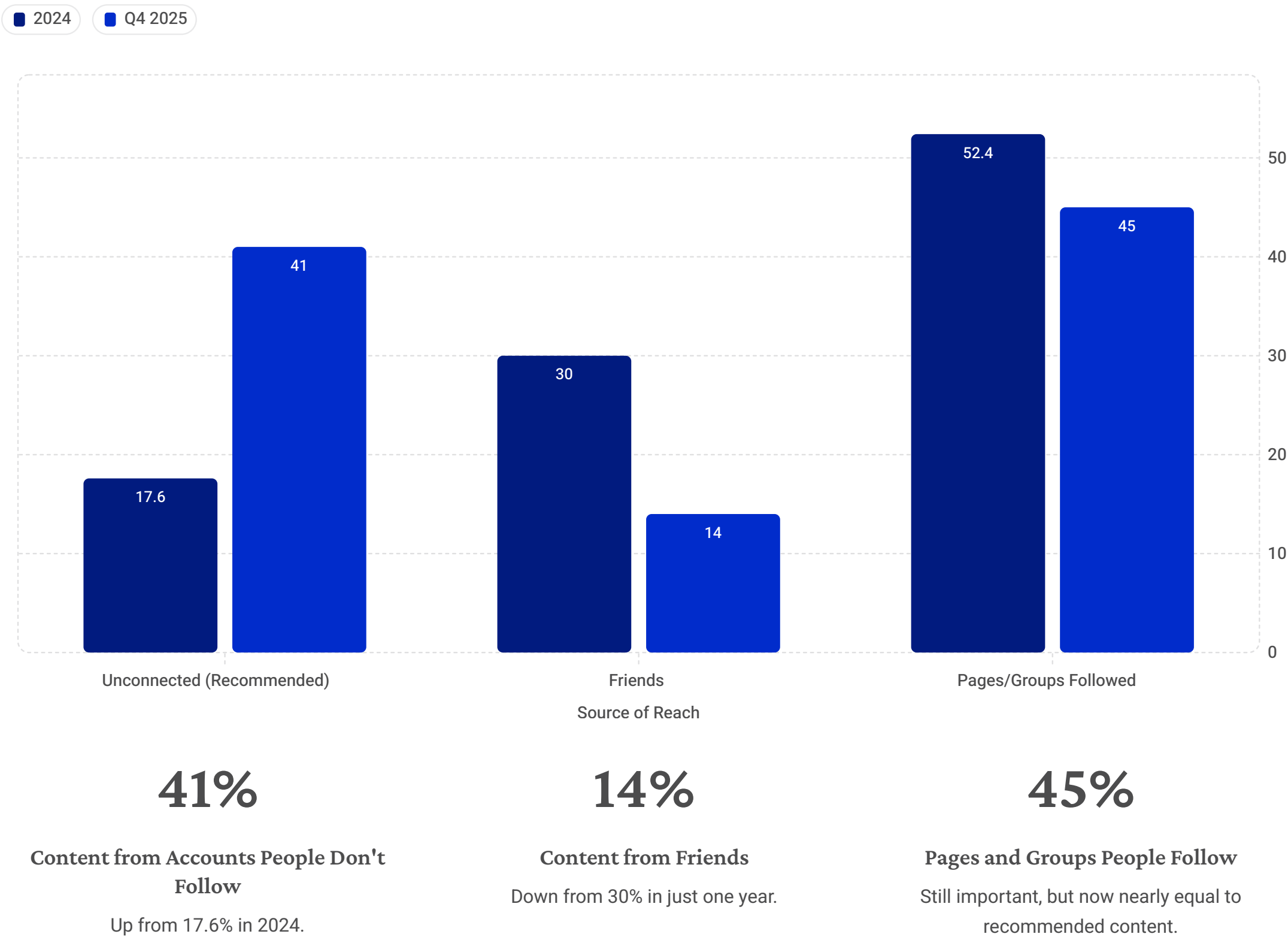
From Social Graph to Interest Graph

For years, social platforms mostly showed people content from accounts they followed. Today recommendations determine what most people see.

What's Changed	Social Graph (Then)	Interest Graph (Now)
How content spreads	Mostly your followers	People with similar interests
Who sees your content	People who followed you	People the algorithm thinks will care
What drives reach	Audience size	Interests and relevance
Brand focus	Grow followers	Create content answering FAQ's
Biggest advantage	Large audiences	Relevant content

Meta's Own Data Shows the Shift to Recommendations

Meta's Widely Viewed Content Report shows just how quickly Facebook is moving from a follower based platform to a recommendation-driven one.



The Takeaways for Brands

Create for people who don't know you

Most people seeing your content probably aren't followers. Every post should clearly explain why someone should care.

Creative has become media

The algorithm rewards content people choose to watch, share and engage with.

Relevance beats audience size

A smaller account with stronger content can outperform a much larger one.

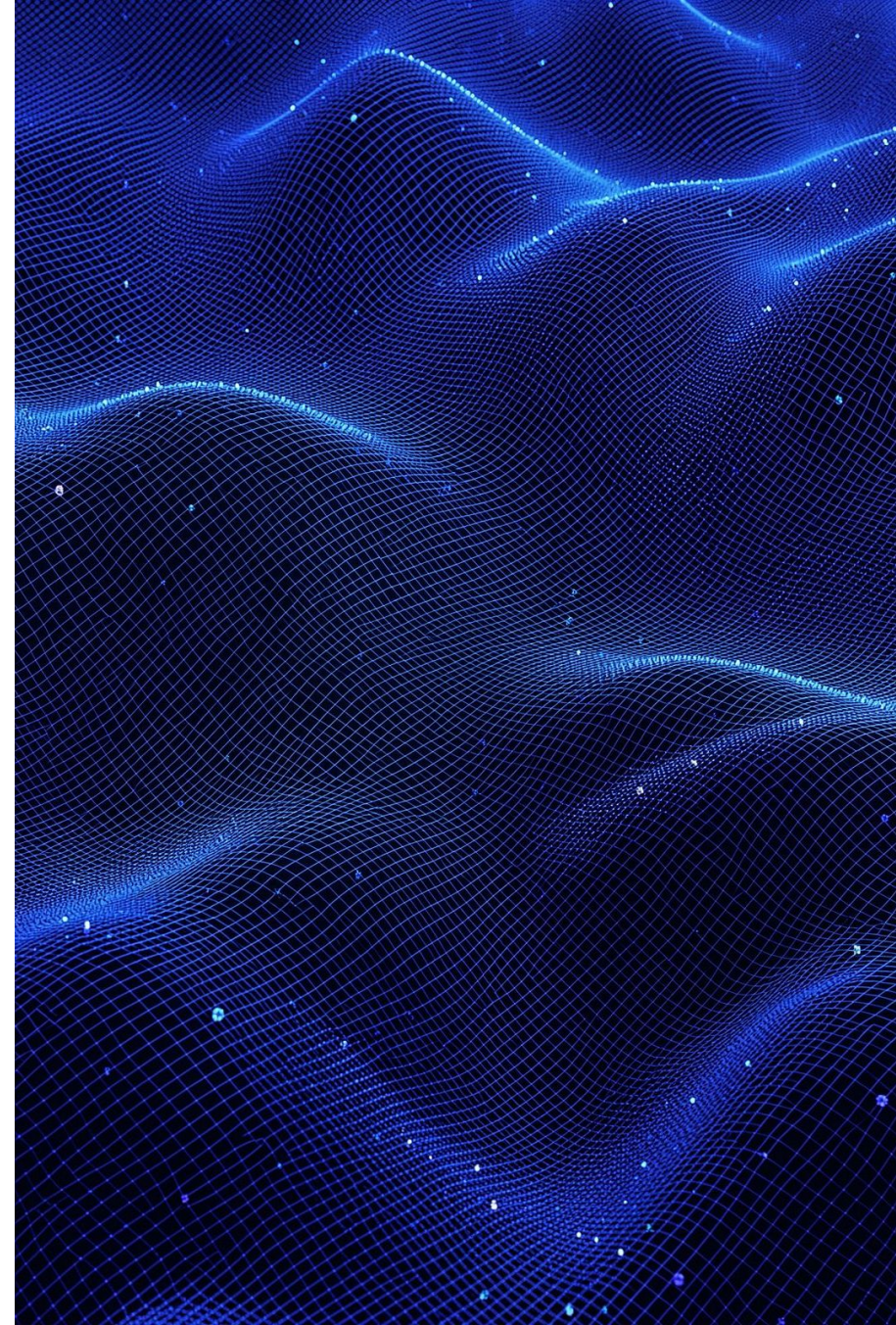
Earn recommendations

The goal is earning distribution.

CHAPTER 04

People Don't Use Every Platform the Same Way

People don't use every platform for the same reason. Someone casually scrolling TikTok is in a very different mindset than someone researching on YouTube or validating a purchase on Reddit.



How Discovery Changes as Intent Increases

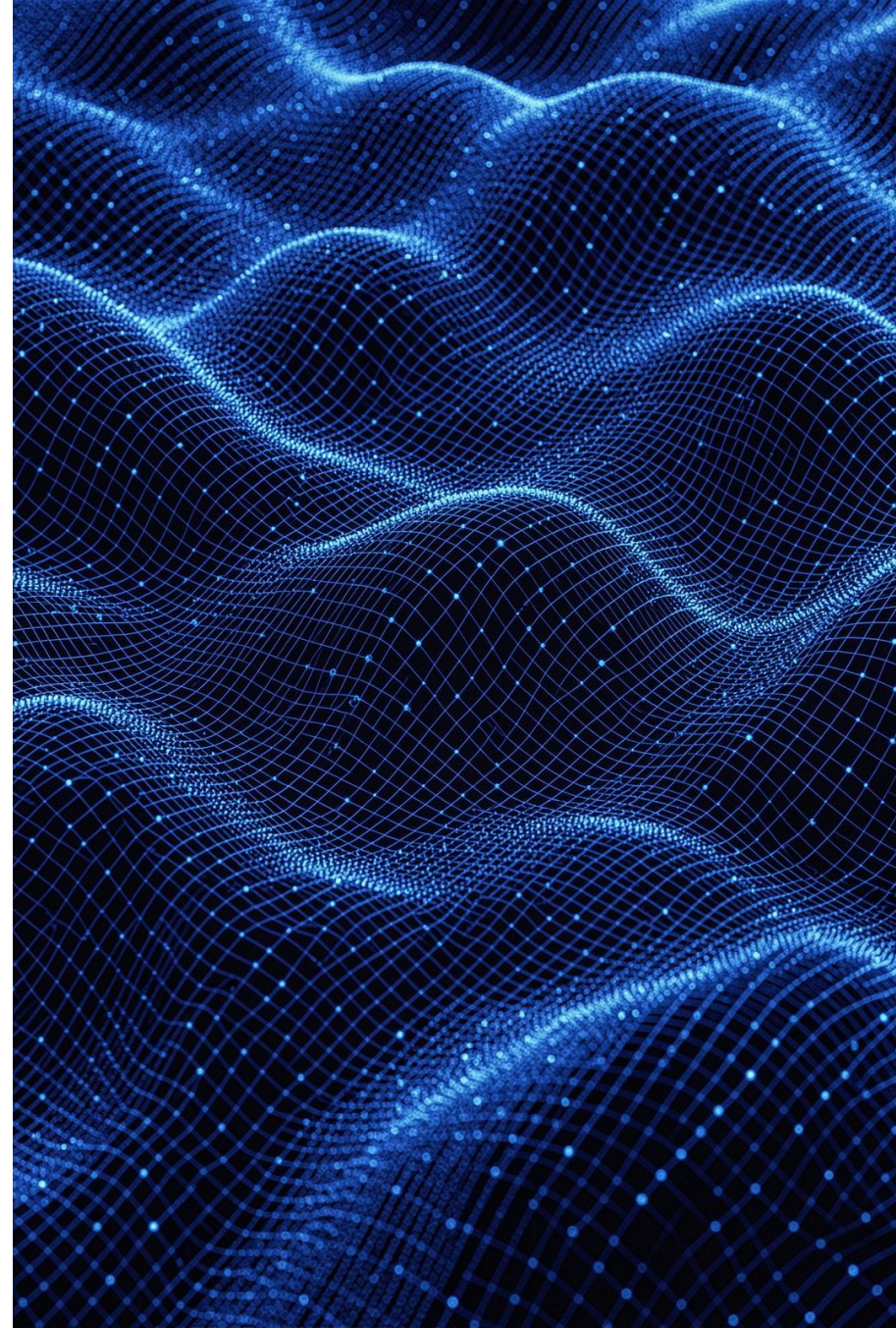
As people move from inspiration to research to making a decision, they naturally shift to different platforms.

Stage	What People Want	Where They Go	What Brands Should Do
Discover	Inspiration, entertainment, new ideas	TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts	Capture attention with creative that people want to watch and share
Learn	Research, comparisons, deeper understanding	YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit	Educate, answer questions, and build trust
Decide	Validation and confidence before taking action	Reddit, AI, Google, TikTok comments	Show up with credible, useful information people can trust

CHAPTER 05

AI Discovery

Recommendation engines changed *where* people discovered content. AI is changing *how* they get answers.



AI Is Changing Discovery Again.

AI compresses the journey

Instead of searching, opening five websites and comparing information, people increasingly ask AI to do that work for them.

Visibility replaces rankings

The goal isn't appearing above the fold on page one anymore. It's becoming part of the answer AI chooses to generate.

Authority becomes a competitive advantage

AI can summarize information, but it still looks for credible sources. Brands that consistently publish useful content are more likely to be surfaced.

The Discovery Journey Has Changed Again

Then	Now
Search Google	Ask ChatGPT
Open five websites	Read one answer
Compare sources yourself	AI compares them
Visit brand websites	Visit only if needed
Decide	Decide

Every step removed from the journey is one less opportunity for brands to influence a consumer.

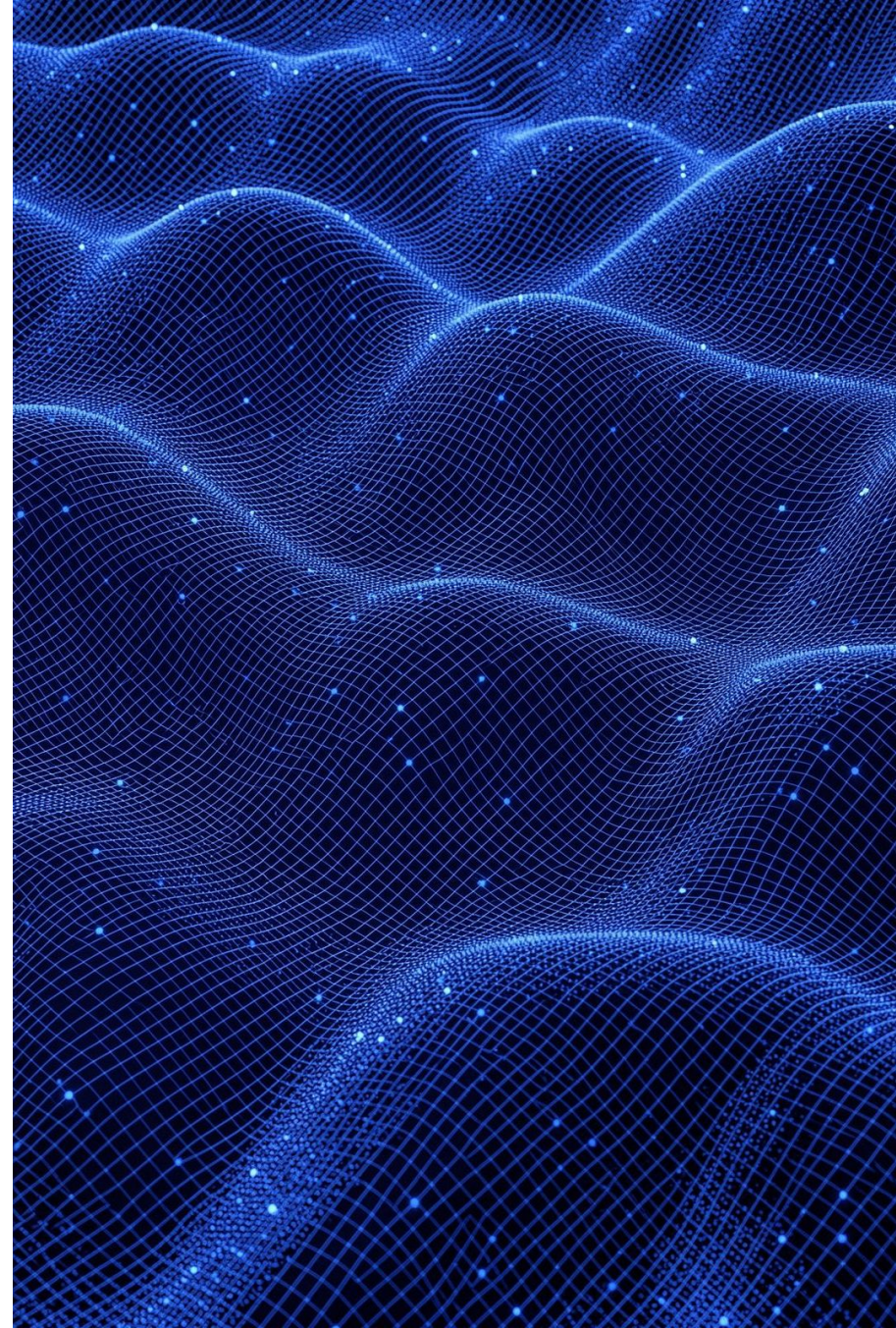
How Brands Should Create Content for AI

Create More Of	Why It Matters
Frequently asked questions	AI looks for content that directly answers real questions.
How to guides	Educational content is easier for AI to summarize and recommend.
Product comparisons	Consumers increasingly ask AI to compare options before buying.
Expert insights	Credible, authoritative content is more likely to be surfaced.
Evergreen resources	Useful content can continue appearing in AI answers long after it's published.

CHAPTER 06

Trust is the New Competitive Advantage

Recommendation engines made distribution available to everyone. AI makes creating content easier than ever. As content becomes abundant, trust becomes harder to earn and far more valuable.



Trust Is Built Before Brands Speak

People Trust...	Why It Matters
Communities	Real conversations influence decisions.
Creators	People trust recommendations from creators they follow.
Customers	Real experiences often carry more weight than marketing.
Experts	Credible experts help people make confident decisions.

Reddit: Where People Validate Decisions

Reddit has become one of the most powerful discovery surfaces on the internet because it looks nothing like branded content.

Validate decisions

Read real experiences before making a purchase.

Ask questions

Get answers from people who have actually used the product.

Compare options

Understand the pros and cons of competing solutions.

The Lesson

Trust is built in communities. Brands that show up where real conversations happen earn discovery that algorithms cannot buy.

Where to Start

- Start with Reddit Answers. Reddit's free AI search tool to identify conversations, communities and common questions about your category.
- Identify the subreddits where your category is discussed
- Answer questions as a subject matter expert, not a brand
- Learn the language of how consumers talk about your brand

Pinterest: A Window Into Consumer Intent

Pinterest is an example of how search and consumer insight are converging.

Search at Massive Scale

Pinterest now sees 80 billion searches every month, reinforcing that discovery increasingly starts on social platforms.

Consumer Intent Data

Pinterest Trends gives marketers free access to search behavior, shopping activity, seasonal trends and emerging interests across dozens of categories.

A Strategic Advantage

Brands can use this data to understand what audiences care about before creating campaigns, products and content.

The Lesson

Discovery is becoming more predictable for brands willing to study search behavior instead of reacting to it.

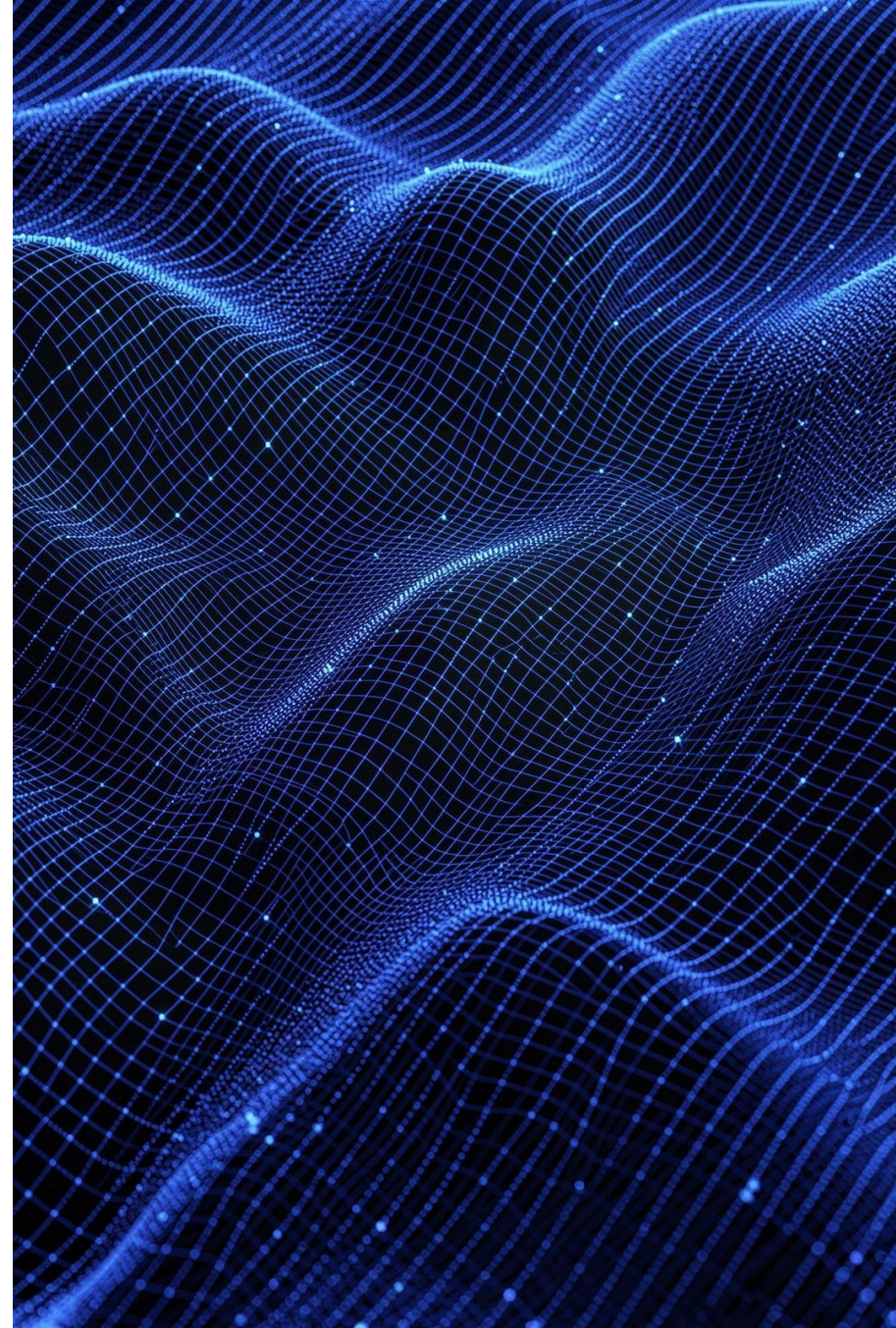
Why Pinterest Is Underinvested

- Review Pinterest Trends before planning campaigns.
- Identify emerging topics and seasonal moments in your category.
- Explore interests beyond your product to better understand your audience.
- Create content around what people are already searching for.

CHAPTER 07

The Discovery Playbook

You've just read six chapters explaining how discovery has changed. Here's how I'd approach building a modern brand strategy today.



Before You Publish, Ask These Seven Questions

Before You Publish, Ask...	Why
Can people find this?	Discovery happens across search, social and AI.
Would someone stop for this?	Recommendations reward attention.
Does it answer a real question?	Useful content gets shared and cited.
Is this right for this platform?	Every platform has a different role.
Would people trust it?	Credibility drives discovery.
Could AI use this as an answer?	AI is becoming a discovery engine.
Would I share this if it wasn't my brand?	Great creative earns distribution.

Discovery used to be about helping people find information. Today, it's about helping information find people. The future belongs to brands that create content worth finding, worth recommending, and worth trusting.

If this makes you think about discovery different, let's connect.

Casey Ross

Social and Creator Strategy and Partnerships

[Connect on LinkedIn](#)