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The rise of owned media

Why AI is bringing the most important channel in-house

Key insights:

AI is shifting communications from a battle for distribution to a battle for inclusion in answers.

Owned media is emerging as a key source layer shaping AI-generated responses—not just a supporting channel.

For decades, corporate communications has been built on a simple premise: influence is earned through distribution. The goal was to place stories, shape narratives, and reach audiences primarily through earned media.

Owned media played a supporting role in that system. It housed the official story, reinforced messaging, and served as infrastructure to push communications outward, especially through social channels. It was necessary, but rarely central to strategy.

The old paradigm is poised to be upended in the world of Generative AI.

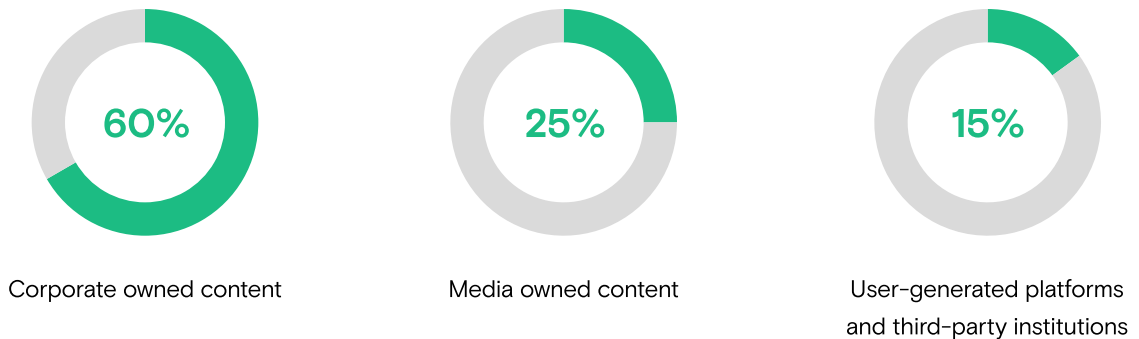
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Recent AI audit findings

Artificial intelligence is not just another channel; it is becoming a primary interface through which stakeholders seek and receive information. And unlike traditional media, AI systems are not optimizing for reach or narrative. They are optimizing for answers.

A growing assumption among communications leaders is that earned media will determine how companies appear in AI-generated responses. **At Penta, our analyses** for global companies across industries **are pointing to owned media as an increasingly important lever to influence LLMs.**

In one recurring audit, roughly **60% of cited material comes from corporate-owned or business-produced sources**, compared to approximately **25% from media outlets**, with the remainder split across user-generated platforms and third-party institutions.



Even when we zoom out to more generic questions in industry baskets, earned media accounts for approximately 28% of the source material cited by LLMs, whereas **owned corporate content comes in at 22%**. This is a far cry from some reports suggesting over 80% of citations come from earned media. In short, when AI systems construct answers to queries about specific brands, they are likely to rely on what businesses publish about themselves and each other.

That has immediate implications for how influence is created. AI systems do not “summarize the internet” in a neutral sense. They assemble responses from a set of sources. Which sources are included, and how often, directly shape the outcome. We are observing that when a company’s own content appears more frequently in AI outputs, overall sentiment improves. When it does not, external sources fill the gap, often with less favorable framing. This reframes the objective of communications. The goal is no longer visibility in the ecosystem; it is competition for inclusion in the answer.

Compounding this shift is the structure of the AI information environment itself. Visibility is not evenly distributed. A small share of domains tends to account for the majority of citations, meaning a limited number of sources shape most outcomes. Critically, many of those sources are not media organizations. They are corporate websites, third-party organizations, social networks, and other forms of owned content.

Implications for communications leaders

This points to a shift that communications strategists have not yet fully absorbed: companies are no longer competing primarily for attention. They are competing to become the sources from which answers are constructed.

The risks of this shift become clear in areas where owned content is absent. **When companies do not publish clearly on a topic, whether it is a point of differentiation, a competitive comparison, or a contentious issue, AI systems do not leave the question unresolved. They answer it using whatever sources are available.** In our analysis, topics without dedicated owned content were consistently associated with weaker outcomes, while areas with strong owned coverage performed better.

Avoidance does not remove the issue. It removes the company's voice from the answer. This has two immediate consequences.

- 1 **Companies must be willing to define themselves in relation to competitors.** AI systems frequently return comparative responses, even when users do not explicitly ask for them. If those comparisons are not present in owned content, they will be sourced elsewhere.
- 2 **Companies must be prepared to address areas of criticism or complexity directly.** Negative information will surface regardless. The only question is whether it appears with or without the company's framing.

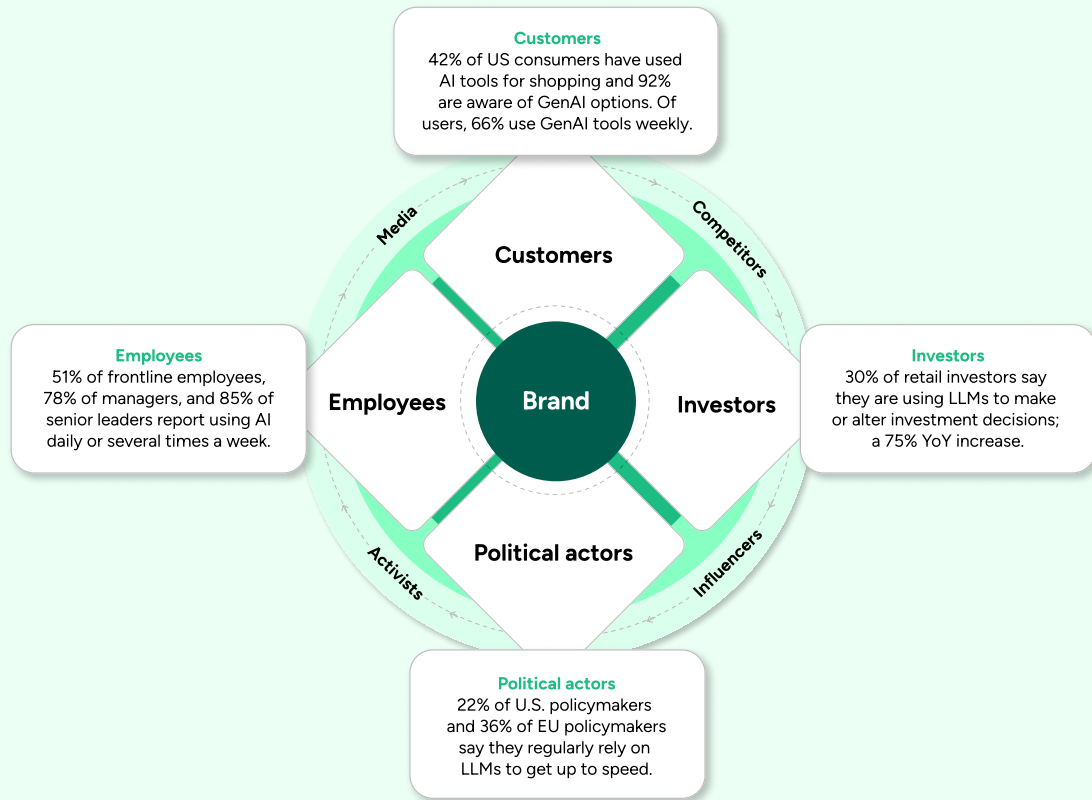
The change for owned media

At the same time, the nature of owned media itself is changing. Historically, owned channels were designed for presentation and storytelling. Increasingly, they must be designed for retrieval. AI systems favor content that is clearly structured, directly responsive to questions, and easy to parse: defined terms, layered headings, FAQ-style formats, and regularly updated material.

By contrast, many corporate websites remain organized around internal logic (products, services, business units) rather than the problems users are trying to solve.

The implication is deeper than a redesign. Owned media is becoming an information infrastructure. Its role is not simply to communicate, but to ensure that a company's perspective is legible and usable within AI-generated answers.

This also introduces a more complex challenge. There is no longer a single, shared narrative about a company. Different stakeholders (investors, employees, political actors, customers) approach AI systems with different questions. Those questions trigger different sources, producing different answers. Across stakeholder groups, AI systems draw from varying mixes of owned content, media, and user-generated platforms, including sources such as LinkedIn, Reddit, and Glassdoor. The result is not variation in tone. It is a variation in underlying reality.



Owned media becomes the only scalable way to ensure that a company's perspective is represented across these parallel contexts. It is no longer just a place where communications are published. It is the foundation from which they are pulled.

For communications leaders, this requires a shift in orientation. It is not sufficient to ask where a story should be placed. The more important question is which answers the organization is equipped to provide, and whether those answers are structured in a way that AI systems can use. This means sustained publishing across the full range of questions stakeholders may ask, not just those a company prefers to answer.

It also requires a reframing of competition. Shaping owned content to surface in AI responses about competitors will demand a different approach—one that is more comparative, more explanatory, and more willing to engage at the category level, not just the brand level.

Earned media will continue to matter. It will shape perception, signal credibility, and influence human audiences. But it is no longer the primary mechanism through which answers will be formed. In an AI-mediated environment, companies are not only communicating about themselves. They are becoming the primary sources from which their reality is constructed. The question is not whether your story is being told. It is whether your content is being used to tell your story.

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