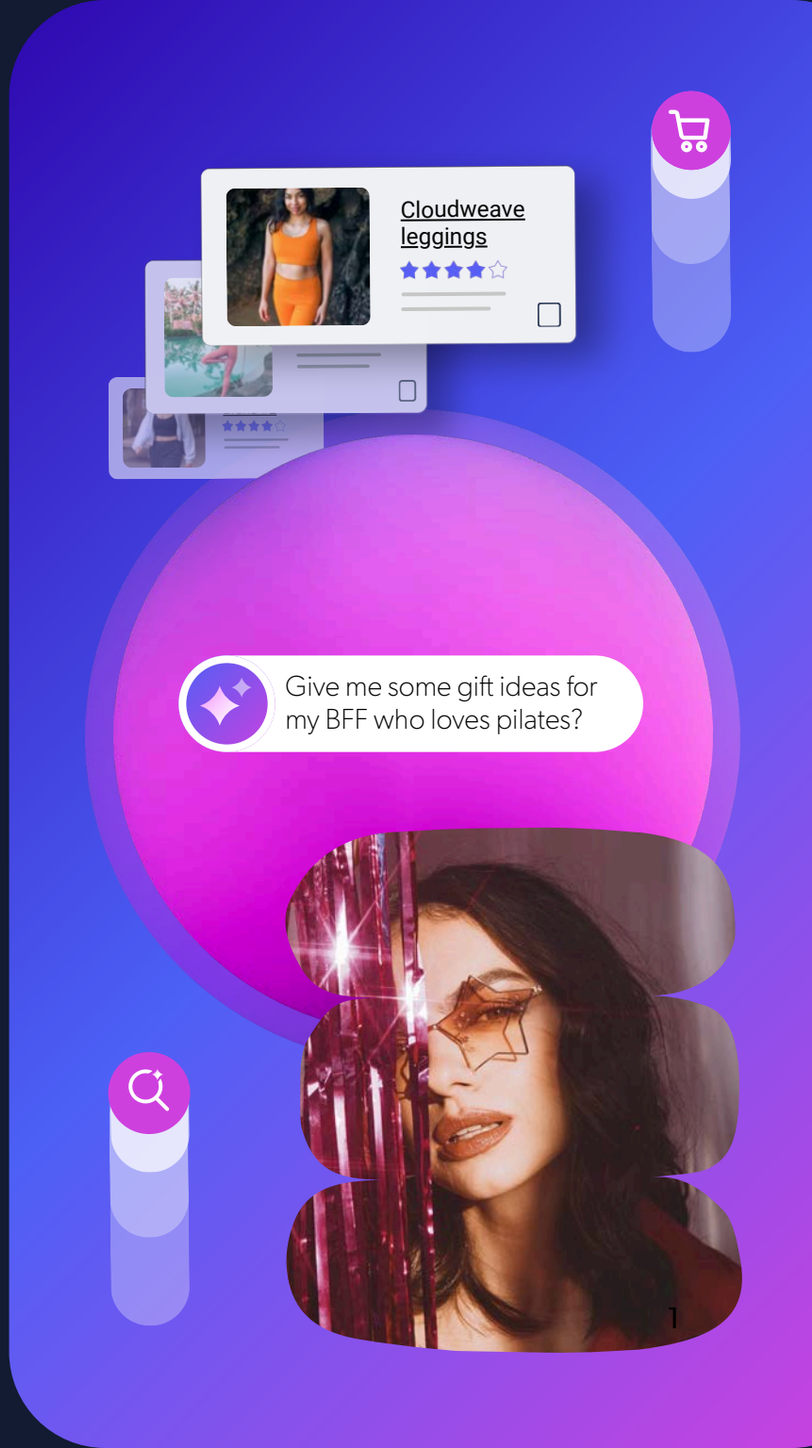
WINNING THE AI SHELF WITH UGC

The brand leader's playbook for product discoverability

bazaarvoice



Brands must be prepared to compete on the AI shelf.

The question is no longer only how they can be discovered, trusted, and chosen by shoppers, but by the AI platforms guiding them.

—Doug Straton, CMO at Bazaarvoice



TABLE OF CONTENTS



6 How shoppers are using AI to help them shop

11 Why UGC is the key to winning the AI shelf

19 The Triple-A framework

21. Making your content accessible
25. Making your content authentic
38. Making your content abundant

31 Conclusion

THERE IS A NEW SHELF...

And it is rapidly becoming one of the most important places your products can appear—or fail to appear. It's the AI shelf: the set of products that AI surfaces, summarizes, and recommends to consumers.

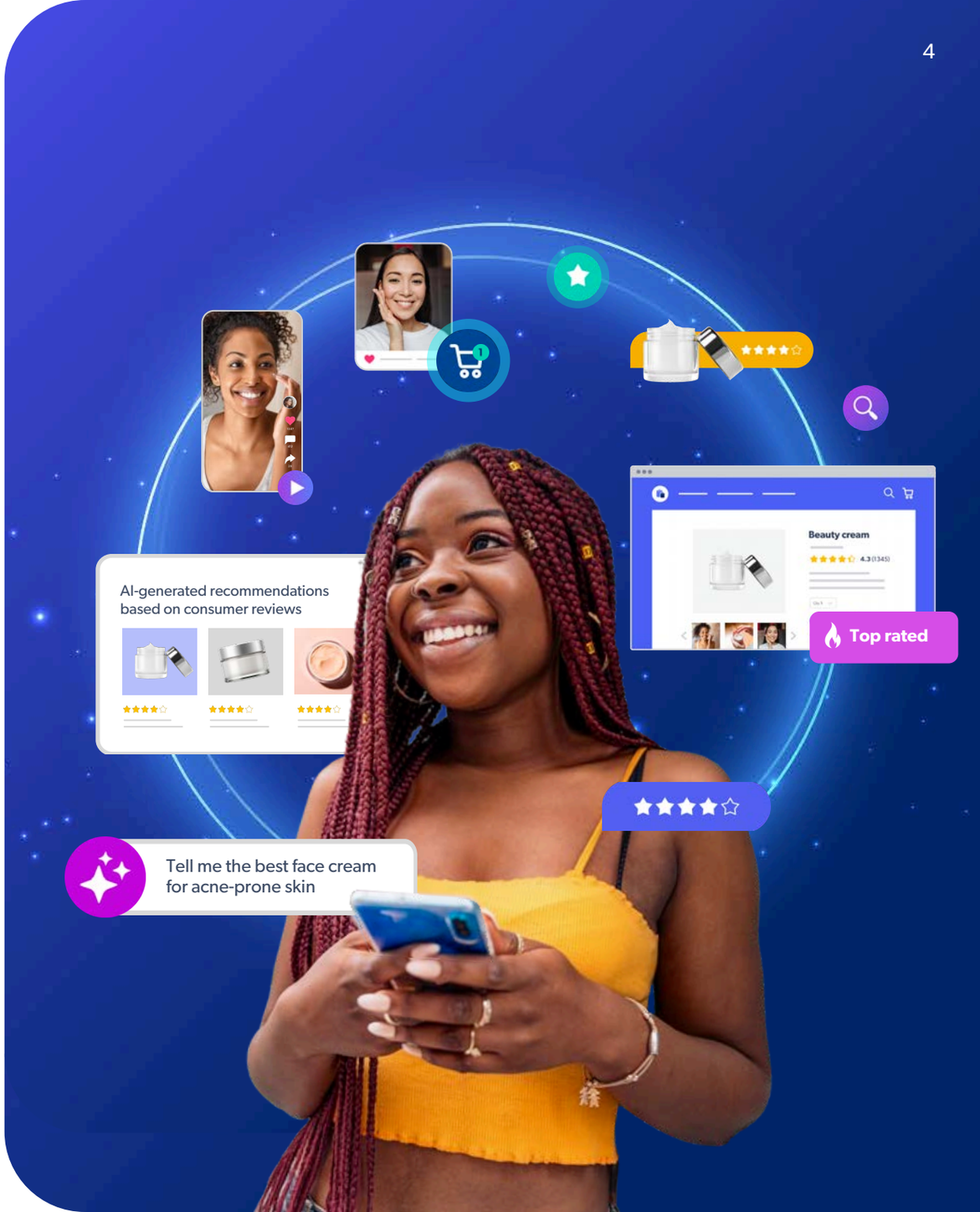
And here's the thing about the AI shelf: you can't buy your way onto it (at least not yet).

For years, brands could rely on a familiar playbook for visibility:

- Invest in ads
- Compete on keywords
- Optimize your product detail pages

While those levers still matter, a new one has emerged that many brands aren't fully prepared for. And it is already having an impact on whether your products are discovered, trusted, and chosen in AI-mediated shopping journeys.

That lever is user-generated content (UGC), and this playbook will show you exactly how to use it.



83%
OF CONSUMERS NOW USE AI

and 43% of that group use it specifically to help them shop. These consumers aren't early adopters—**AI tools have become mainstream.**



Source

As AI becomes a dominant force in how consumers discover and evaluate products, the brands that win won't necessarily be the ones with the biggest budgets. They'll be the ones whose products AI—and the shoppers who use AI—can find, understand, and trust.

For brand and e-commerce marketing leaders, this raises three questions:

How do I ensure my products are surfaced in AI search engines and shopping experiences?

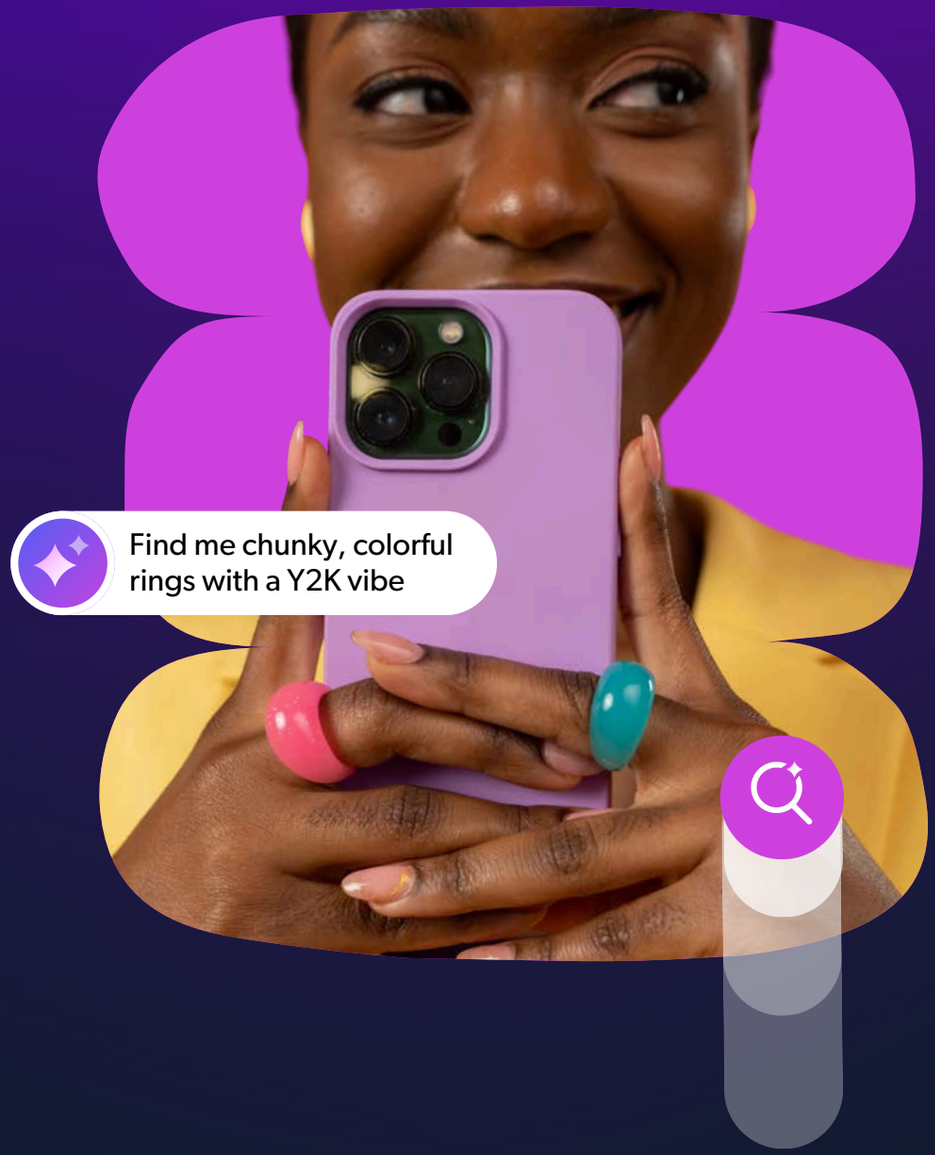
How do I ensure that when my products are surfaced, they are represented accurately?

How do I protect the trust between consumers and my brand when their shopping journey is increasingly mediated by AI?

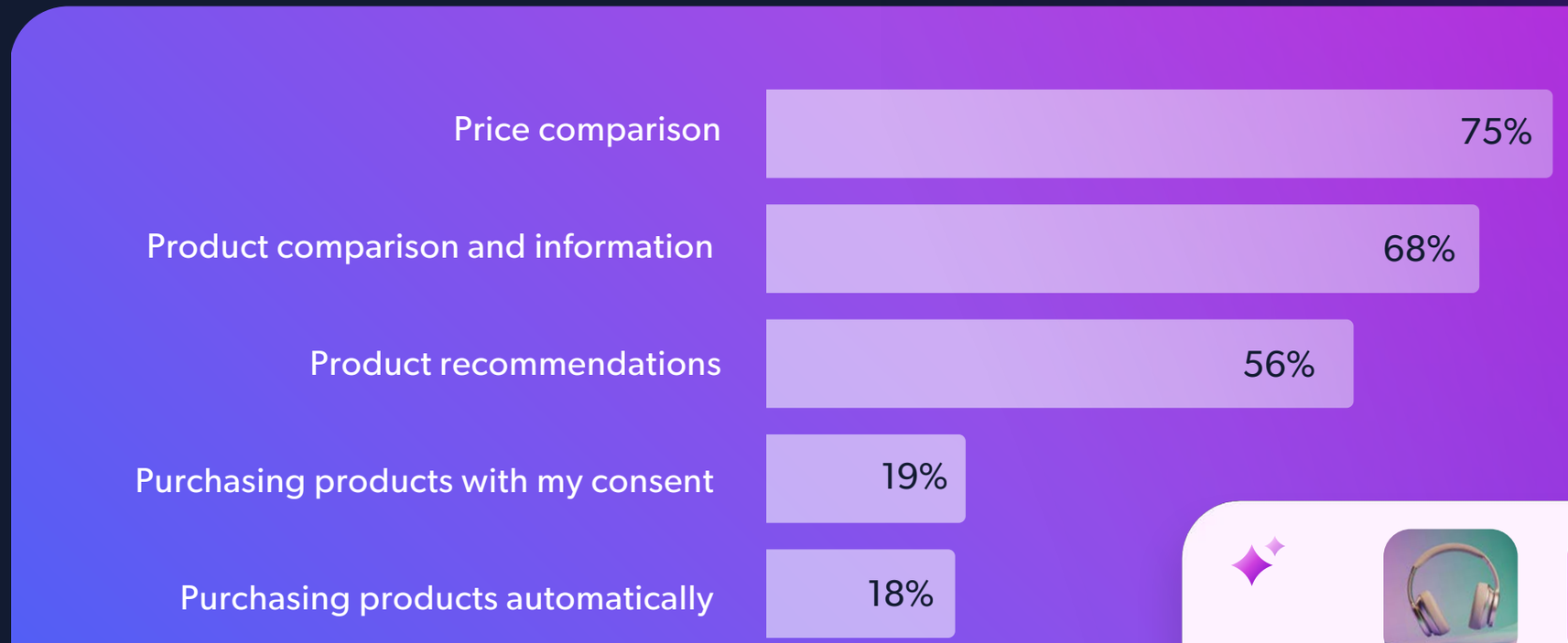
This playbook answers all three—with the data to back it up and the strategic framework to act on it. We call it the **Triple-A framework**: a three-part strategy for making your user-generated content accessible, authentic, and abundant enough to compete and win on the AI shelf.

1

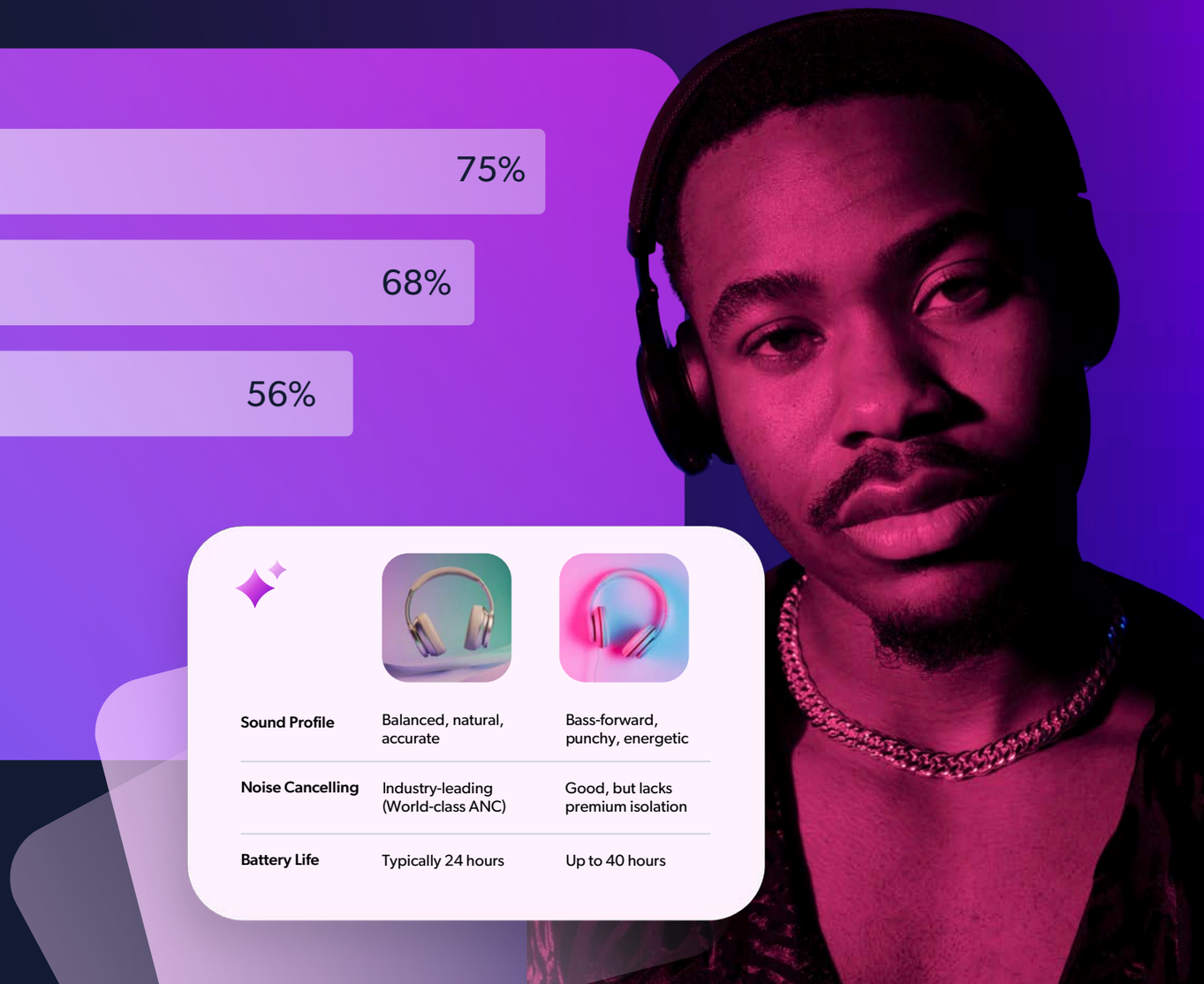
HOW SHOPPERS ARE USING AI TO HELP THEM SHOP



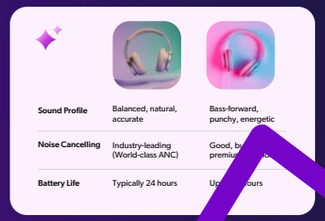
When asked which tasks they would trust AI to handle when shopping online, consumers said:



Source



56% OF CONSUMERS TRUST AI TO RECOMMEND PRODUCTS



Source

Not long ago, the question of whether AI would meaningfully change how most consumers shopped felt somewhat open. Would adoption be wide or narrow? Fast or slow? Confined to certain demographics or categories?

We have our answer now.

Consumers have adopted AI to help them shop at an unprecedented pace and scale, and across many different points in their shopping journey. But there's one point in that journey that holds particularly significant implications for brands: 56% of consumers trust AI to recommend products to them.

That means that for more than half of consumers, the first filter between discovering your product and potentially purchasing it is not a search ad or any of the other traditional levers for visibility. It's AI. And AI decides, based on the signals available to it, whether your product is worth surfacing at all.

That is a fundamental shift in discovery, and it changes how brands need to think about it.

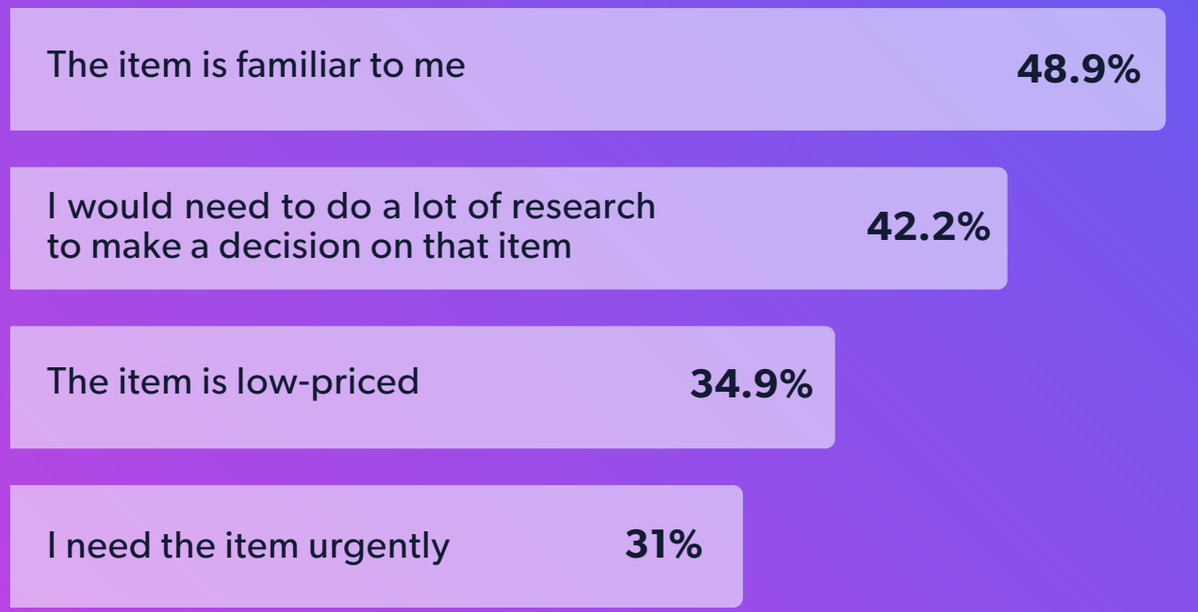
According to that same research by Bazaarvoice and EMARKETER:

> **54% of shoppers use AI as a supplement to traditional research when searching for product recommendations**

> **18% of shoppers exclusively use AI when searching for product recommendations**

Additional research by Publicis and EMARKETER reveals something equally important about when consumers lean on AI most heavily. When asked under which circumstances they would most likely trust an AI recommendation, consumers said:

When consumers trust AI recommendations



Notice something interesting here?

Consumers trust AI recommendations both when the decision feels low-stakes, such as with a familiar or inexpensive item, or when the decision feels high-stakes and research-intensive.

In other words, this research indicates that AI is earning trust at both ends of the purchase complexity spectrum.

And as shoppers turn to AI for product discovery, across purchase types, the brand leaders we speak with are all asking a version of the same question: *If AI is increasingly the first touchpoint in a consumer's path to purchase, how do we make sure we're present at that moment?*

It's the right question, and the stakes are real. AI visibility is now critical to brand health and growth.

It used to be that brands could reach consumers and establish baseline awareness simply through heavy ad spend. That is no longer the case.

AI relies on the contextual signals found in UGC

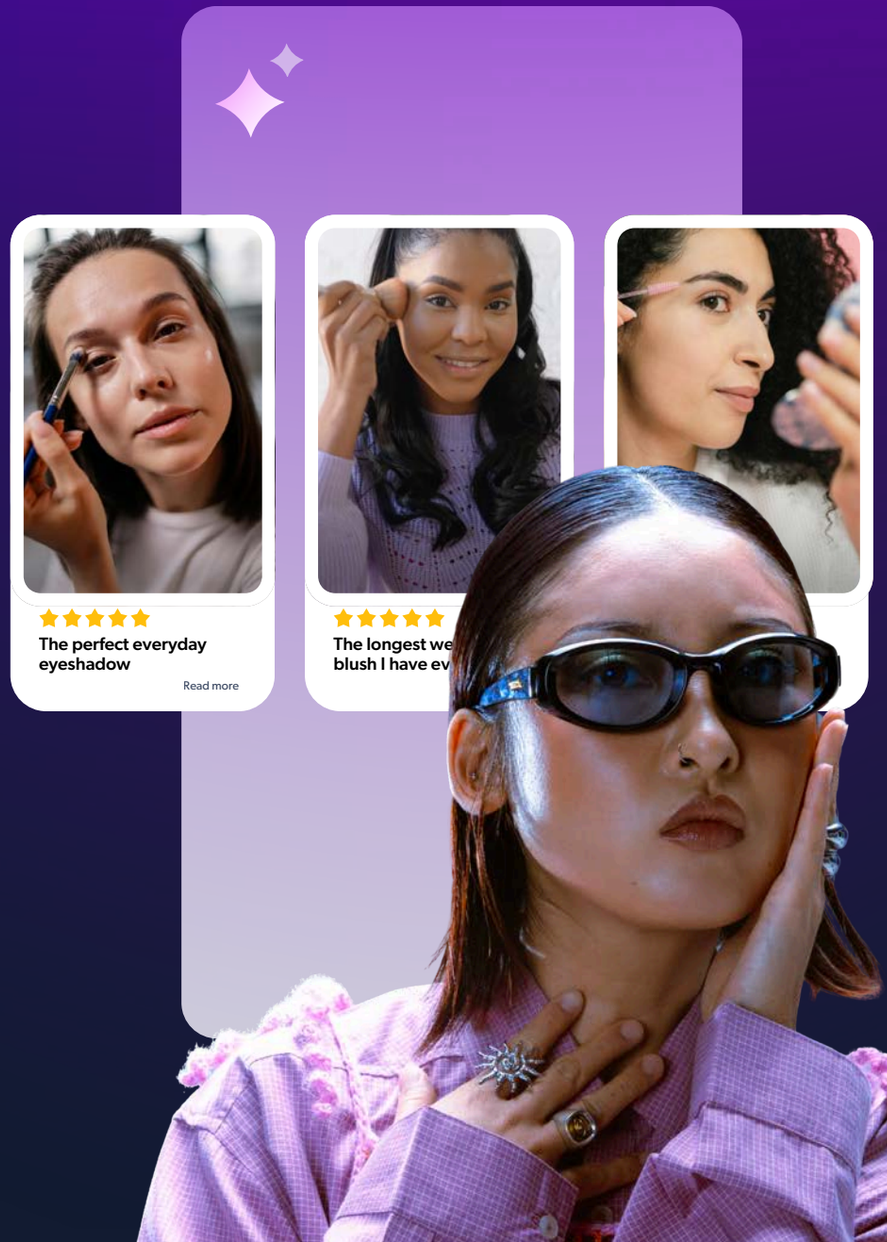
to confidently surface your products. Ad spend can no longer substitute for investment in quality content.

—Jo Callahan, Head of Brand Strategy and Experience at Bazaarvoice



2

WHY UGC IS THE KEY TO WINNING THE AI SHELF



WHAT AI NEEDS TO MAKE A RECOMMENDATION

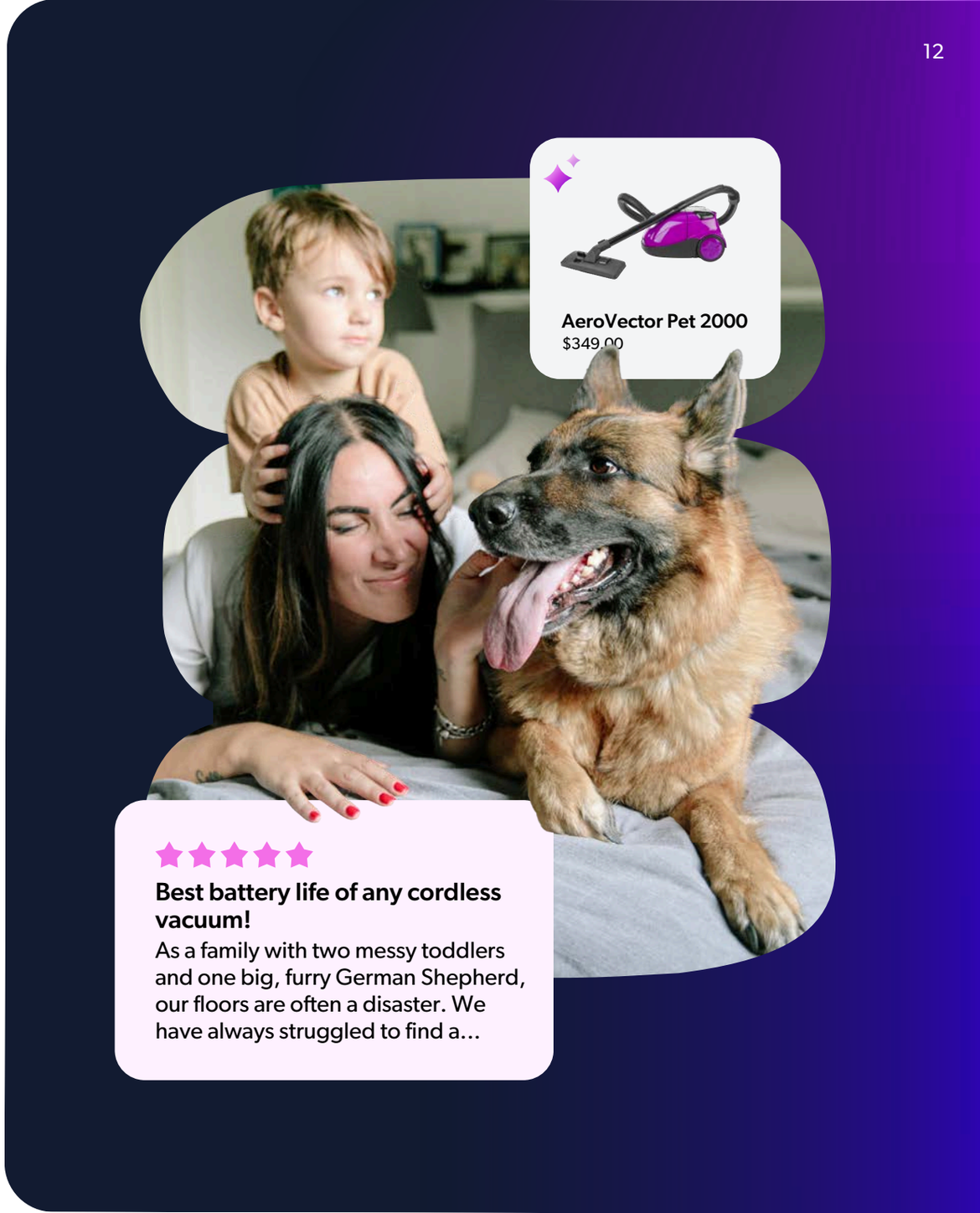
Before a brand can optimize their products to show up in AI recommendations, they need to understand *how* the AI decides *what* to recommend.

When a consumer asks an AI tool to recommend a product, the AI isn't guessing—it's evaluating. More specifically, it's evaluating signals, and the signals it relies on most heavily aren't the ones brands have traditionally invested in in their content.

Yes, AI can and will read your product specifications. But what it really needs, what gives it the confidence to surface your product over your competitors', is context.

The kind that tells it not just what a product is, but who it's *really* for.

Because here's the thing: AI can't try on a pair of pants, drink a soda, or vacuum a carpet in a home with two toddlers and a German Shepherd. These are experiences only humans can have—and the only place those human experiences are captured at scale, in a form AI can read and learn from, is user-generated content.



Based on what we understand about how AI systems evaluate content, these are the signals AI relies on to match the right product with the right shopper:

Context: Personal use cases: who used it, where they used it, why they needed it, and how it compared to previous solutions

Specificity: Concrete details like "took 5 minutes to set up," step-by-step descriptions of real usage, product or model names

Consistency: Plausibility against known product facts, internal coherence within a single review, and consistency of details across multiple reviews

Authenticity cues: Balanced critique (pros and cons), conversational tone, emotional resonance, and sensory language

★★★★★

Best battery life of any cordless vacuum!

As a family with two messy toddlers and one big, furry German Shepherd, our floors are often a disaster. We have always struggled to find a vacuum that can clean our (sometimes very dirty) carpets effectively without dying halfway through. This vacuum finally does the job!

We bought the AeroVector and opted for the IQ model with the dirt sensing technology. The additional cost has been totally worth it for us. Since it adjusts its power depending on how much dirt it finds, we can vacuum all of our carpets without it dying—a big annoyance with the previous cordless vacuums we tried.

Our only complaint is that the dust bin is a little small for us, and we have to empty it at least twice during a vacuum (but our dog sheds A LOT).



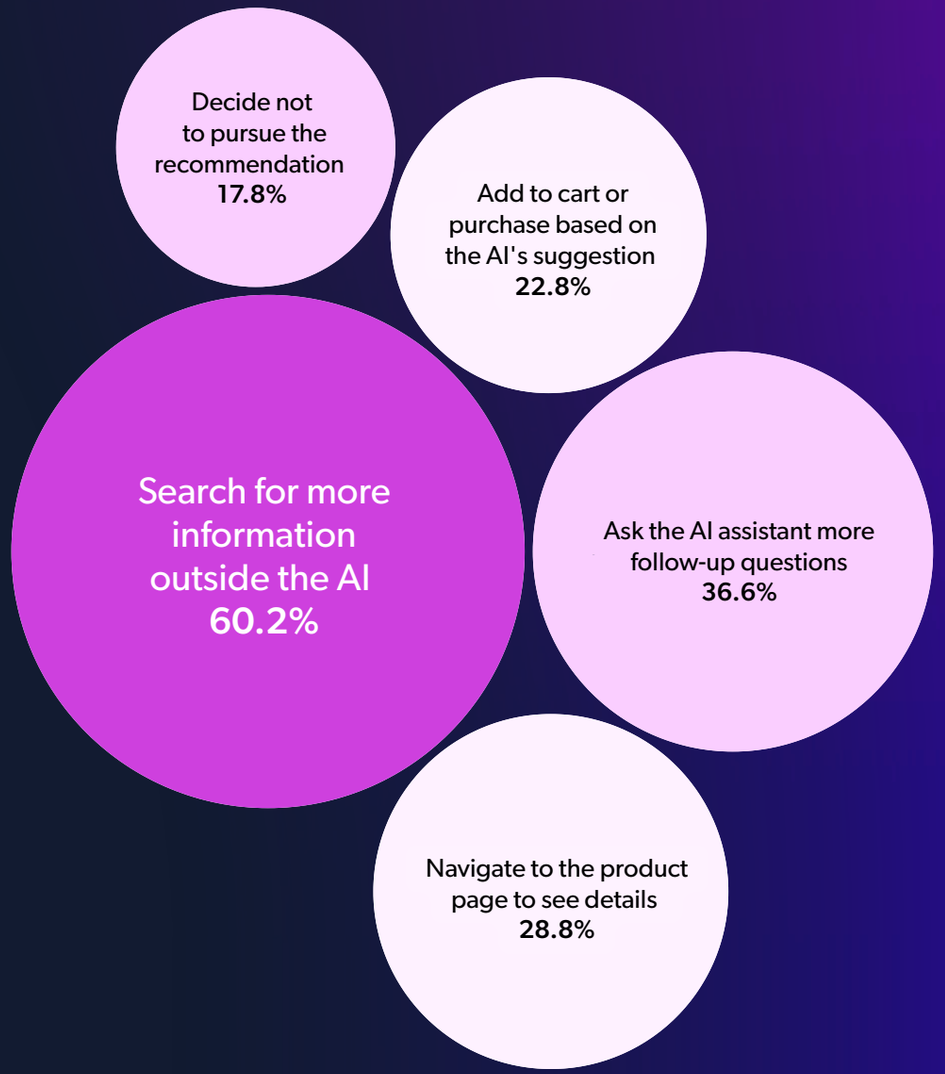
SHOPPERS VERIFY AI RECOMMENDATIONS

And it's not just AI who depends on the context found in UGC. Even as AI takes on a larger role in the path to purchase, consumers aren't handing over the keys entirely. After AI makes a recommendation, most shoppers don't immediately act on it—they *verify* it.

In a study by Publicis and EMARKETER, when asked what they do after AI recommends a product to them, a full 60.2% of consumers said they do additional research before making a purchase.

What kind of research? Data from Bazaarvoice and EMARKETER gives us a clue.

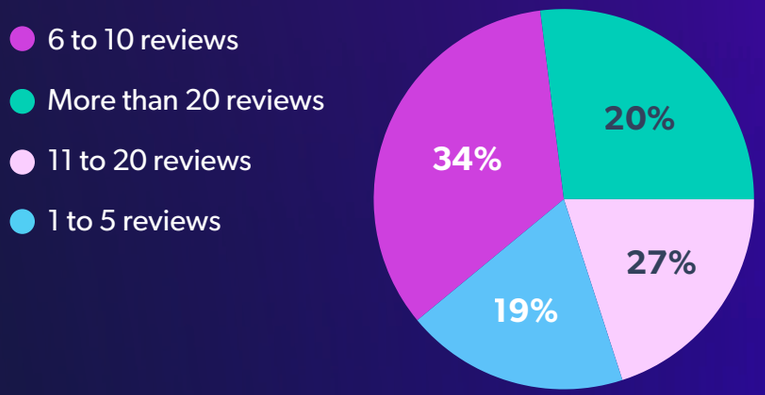
What consumers do after AI recommends a product



Source

Research by Bazaarvoice and EMARKETER asked consumers how important it was to them to see human content, like reviews and other UGC, to verify a product recommended by AI. Across every product category, the answer was resounding: **Very important.**

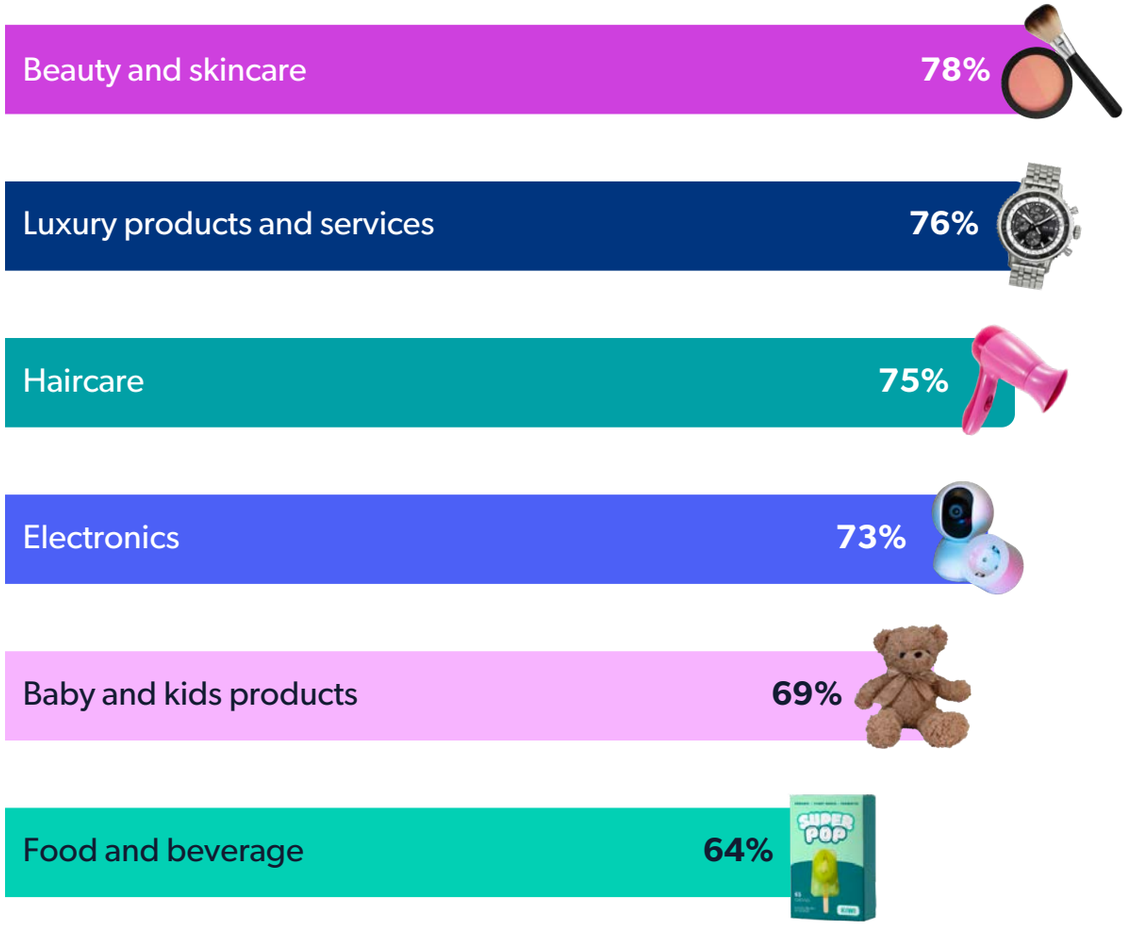
When asked how many reviews they need to see, the majority of shoppers want to see at least six reviews before they buy an AI recommended product. Over a quarter want to see twenty or more.



Source

Percentage of shoppers who said it was very important to them to verify AI recommendations with reviews

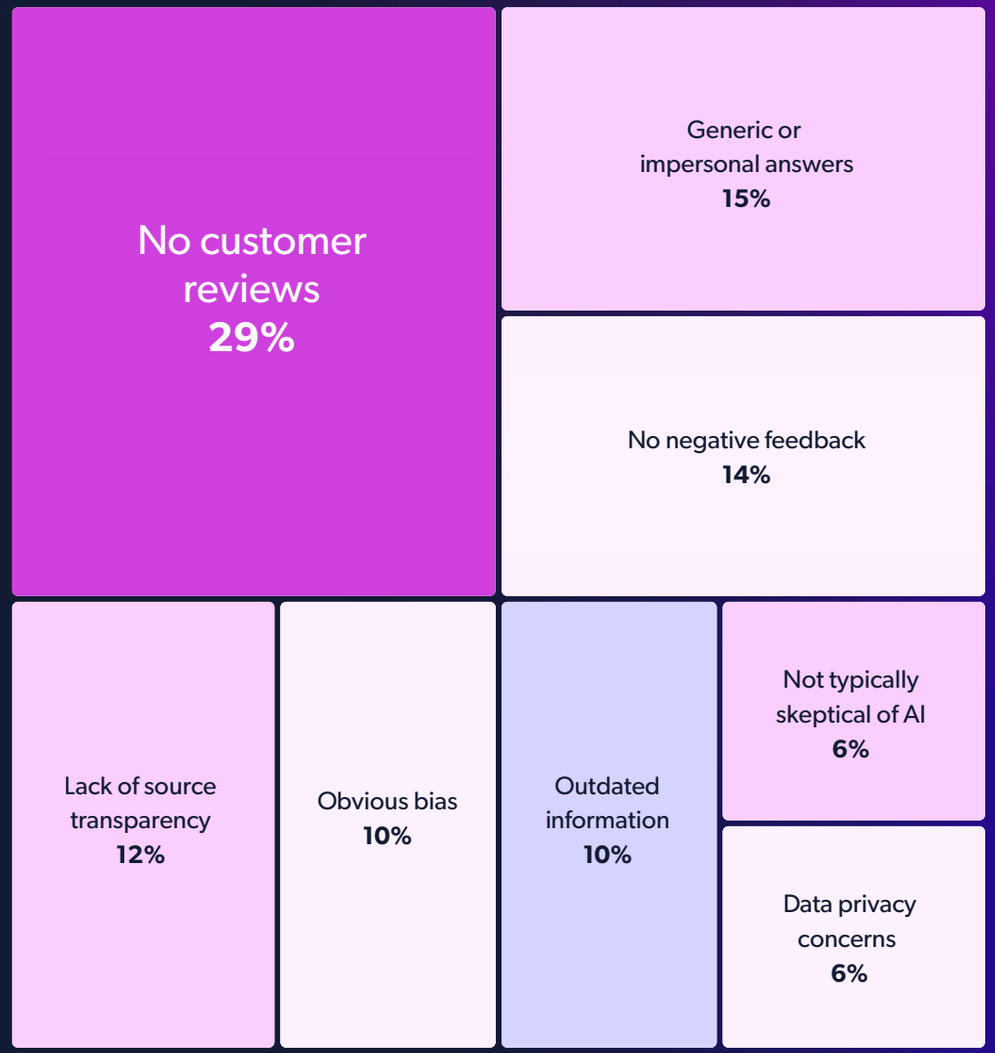
Breakdown by product category



But perhaps even more telling: When asked what would make them most skeptical of an AI recommendation, the top answer by a significant margin was the absence of reviews.

More than anything else—more than bias, more than outdated information, more than privacy concerns—it's the absence of customer reviews that makes shoppers distrust an AI recommendation.

Factors that make shoppers most skeptical of AI recommendations



Source

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

UGC serves a dual role in the AI-mediated shopping journey that no other content type can replicate. It contains the context that helps AI surface and recommend your products in the first place, and it provides the proof that gives shoppers the confidence to act on that recommendation once they've received it.

Invest in UGC and you're optimizing for the two audiences that now stand between your product and a sale simultaneously—AI and the shopper.

Let's talk about how to capture this opportunity.



Your brand is now being evaluated by two distinct audiences—shoppers and AI agents. The Triple-A framework for content positions you competitively to

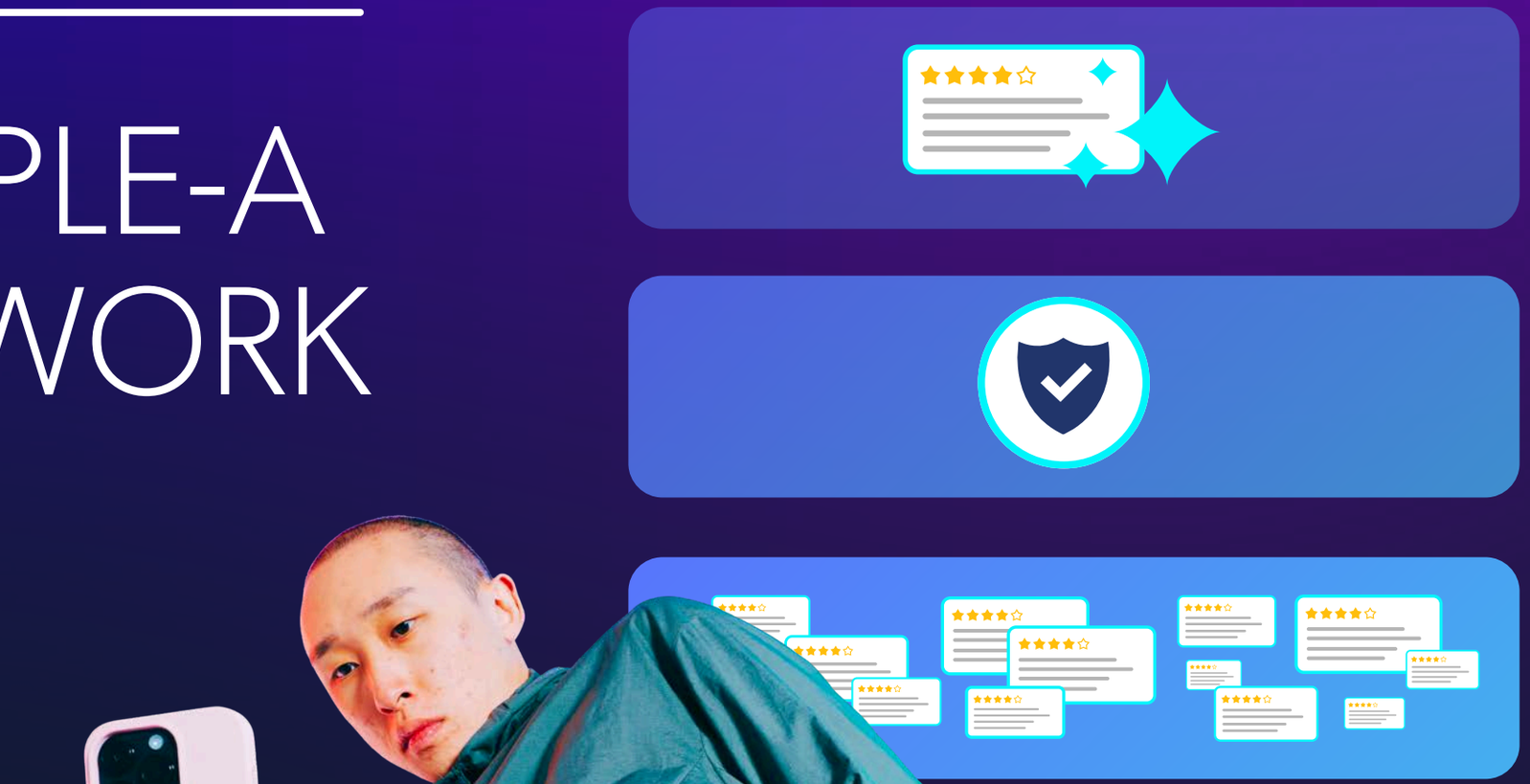
be discovered, trusted, and chosen by both.

—Nick Shiftan, CTO at Bazaarvoice



3

THE TRIPLE-A FRAMEWORK



PUT YOUR UGC ON THE A-TEAM

You get it: user-generated content is essential in the AI era.

But knowing that UGC matters and knowing how to make it work are two different things.

Not all UGC is created equal, and not all UGC strategies are built to win in an AI-mediated world.

The infrastructure behind your UGC matters.
The trustworthiness of your UGC matters.
And the depth, recency, and volume of your UGC matters.

The Triple-A framework is a three-part strategy for making sure your UGC is accessible, authentic, and abundant enough to compete and win on the AI shelf.

Accessible



Data must be indexed so AI and search engines can find and read it effortlessly.

Authentic



Content must be from verified, trustworthy human voices that build buyer confidence.

Abundant



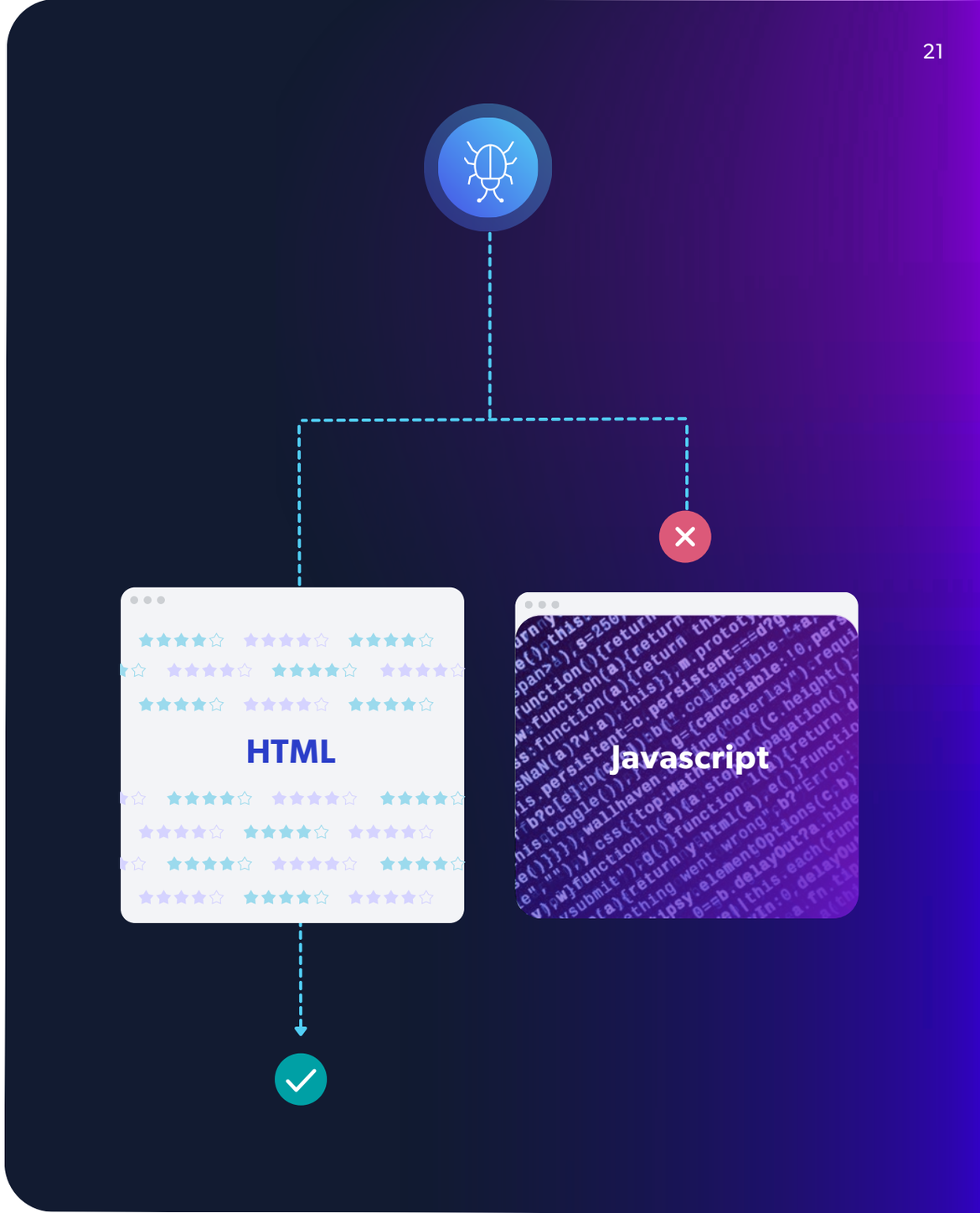
Having a deep pool of reviews both feeds AI models and gives shoppers the “social proof” they need.

Making your content accessible

This is the foundation everything else is built on, and it's a piece many brands don't know they're missing.

You can have thousands of reviews. You can have rich UGC across every product in your catalog. But if that content isn't structured in a way that makes it visible to AI crawlers, it effectively doesn't exist to AI. And if it doesn't exist to AI, it can't use it to surface or recommend your products.

Most UGC on brand and retail websites is rendered dynamically. This means it loads via JavaScript after the initial page loads. This works fine for human visitors, whose browsers execute JavaScript automatically. But some AI crawlers, such as ChatGPT's, don't execute JavaScript. They read the raw HTML of a page—and if your reviews aren't embedded there, those crawlers leave your site without having seen the contextual, experiential UGC that is so valuable to AI.



AUTHENTIC DISCOVERY API™

At Bazaarvoice, we built the Authentic Discovery API™ specifically to solve this problem. Our API injects structured UGC directly into server-side HTML, making your reviews instantly visible to AI crawlers—no JavaScript required.

And accessibility doesn't just affect whether your products are surfaced. It affects how accurately they are represented. When AI can "see" the nuanced, human experience of your products as reflected in UGC, it doesn't just know your product exists, it understands who it's *really* for and why it's worth recommending.

Remember that second question we raised at the start of this playbook: *How do I ensure that when my products are surfaced, they are represented accurately?* This is it.





GOOGLE SHOPPING GRAPH PARTNERSHIP

Another way we're helping our clients' UGC be as accessible to AI as possible?

Bazaarvoice clients' verified reviews and customer photos are now an authoritative reference for the Google Shopping Graph—the dataset that powers recommendations across Google Shopping, Gemini, and AI Overviews.

By providing a direct, structured feed into the Google Shopping Graph, we ensure that Google's AI-driven tools have access to the data found in your UGC. This strengthens your brand's visibility in precisely the places where consumers are increasingly going for product discovery.

How accessible is your content to AI?

This quick assessment will help identify how accessible your content currently is to AI.

Have your technical search specialist answer each question

Score your brand 2 for yes, 1 for partially or unsure, and 0 for no

- Is my UGC rendered in server-side HTML, or does it load dynamically via JavaScript after the page loads?
- Can AI crawlers access the full text of my reviews when they index my product pages?
- Does my UGC platform have a direct integration with any major AI-driven shopping tools?
- Is my review content structured in a way that makes it easy for AI to parse and interpret—including clear product names, dates, and reviewer context?
- Does my brand have a Q&A section on product pages, and is that content visible to AI crawlers?

Scoring: *If you scored…*

8–10 Your content is well-positioned for AI visibility.

5–7 You likely have accessibility gaps that are costing you visibility.

0–4 You have critical accessibility gaps that are costing you visibility and this should be your immediate priority before investing further in content volume or quality.

Priority action: Ask your UGC vendor two questions…

1. **Are our reviews rendered in server-side HTML?**
2. **Do you have a direct integration with the Google Shopping Graph?**

If your vendor can provide these two things, this will go a long way in closing your accessibility gaps quickly.

Experience

Expertise

Authority

Trust



Making your content authentic

Accessibility gets your content seen, but authenticity determines whether it's trusted.

It's obvious why authenticity matters to shoppers, but why is it important to AI?

For an AI tool, trust is existential. If it surfaces inaccurate information or recommends products that don't deliver, it risks eroding the trust of its users and having those users move to a competitor. That's an outcome every major AI platform is highly motivated to avoid.

As a result, many major AI models are designed to prioritize content that reflects a search quality framework developed by Google and known as EEAT: Experience, Expertise, Authority, and Trust. Content that is contextual, experiential, consistent, specific, and trustworthy. In other words, user-generated content.

It turns out that the same qualities that make UGC valuable to a shopper are the qualities that make it valuable to AI.

THE TRUST SIGNAL QUESTION

The Bazaarvoice Intelligent Trust Mark™ was designed as a signal to shoppers that reviews meet our highest standards for moderation and fraud detection—that what they're reading reflects real experiences from real people. But there's a reasonable argument that what functions as a trust signal for consumers may also for AI.

We want to be transparent here: The precise signals that AI systems use to evaluate content trustworthiness are largely proprietary. We don't know with certainty that a verified trust marker directly influences AI outputs. What we do know is that AI systems are designed to prioritize reliable content—and investing in infrastructure that protects content authenticity puts you in a strong competitive position, regardless of how the specific mechanics evolve.

Setting AI aside entirely: Authentic UGC protects your consumers, strengthens your brand's relationship with its customers, and helps shield your brand from the growing regulatory scrutiny around fake and misleading reviews. For companies operating in the United States, the Federal Trade Commission has made clear that this is an enforcement priority, and the cost of getting it wrong is significant and growing.

Authenticity is a brand protection fundamental, not just an AI optimization strategy.



How authentic is your content to AI—and to shoppers?

This quick assessment will help identify where your content authenticity infrastructure is strong and where it needs reinforcement.

Have your UGC program manager answer each question

Score your brand 2 for yes, 1 for partially or unsure, and 0 for no

- **Do I have clear moderation standards and active fraud detection in place for my UGC?**
- **Are my review collection prompts designed to elicit specific, detailed, experiential feedback—rather than generic ratings?**
- **Are my verified reviews clearly distinguished from unverified ones, both for shoppers and for AI?**
- **Does my UGC program actively encourage reviewers to include the kind of detail that signals genuine experience—for example, personal use cases, balanced critique, and sensory language?**
- **Is my UGC platform designed to meet emerging regulatory standards around review authenticity, including FTC guidelines?**

Scoring: *If you scored…*

8–10 Your content is well-positioned to signal trust to both shoppers and AI.

5–7 You have moderate authenticity—your moderation and verification practices may be solid, but your review collection strategy may not be generating the depth of content AI values.

0–4 You have critical authenticity gaps that pose both an AI optimization and brand protection risk.

Priority action:

Pull a sample of your twenty most recent reviews on a hero product. Read them as if you were an AI trying to understand who this product is really for and how it performs in real life.

How many useful signals are there? If the reviews are mostly short, generic, or rating-only, your review collection prompts need attention—and this is one of the fastest and highest-impact changes you can make.

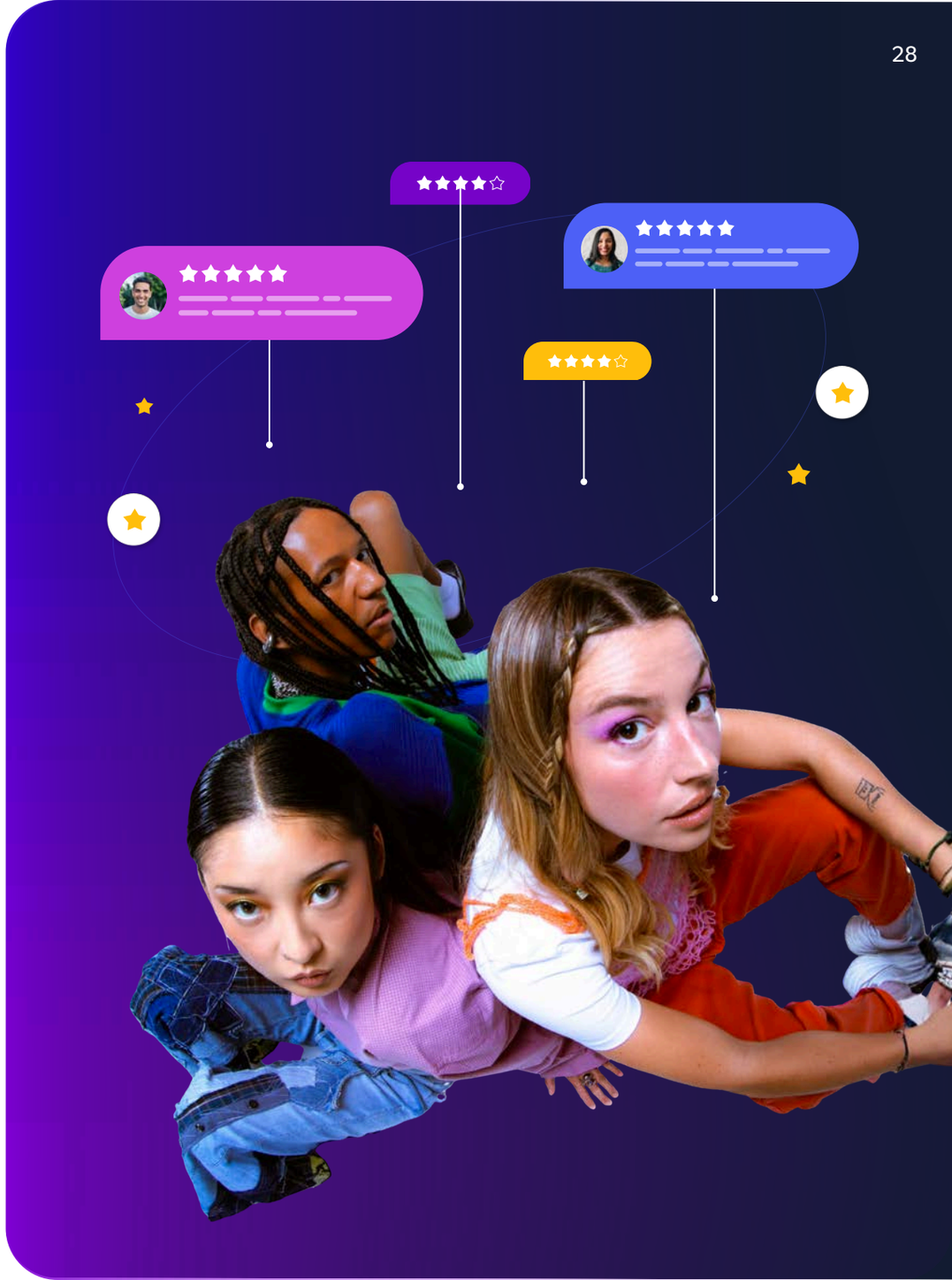
Making your content abundant

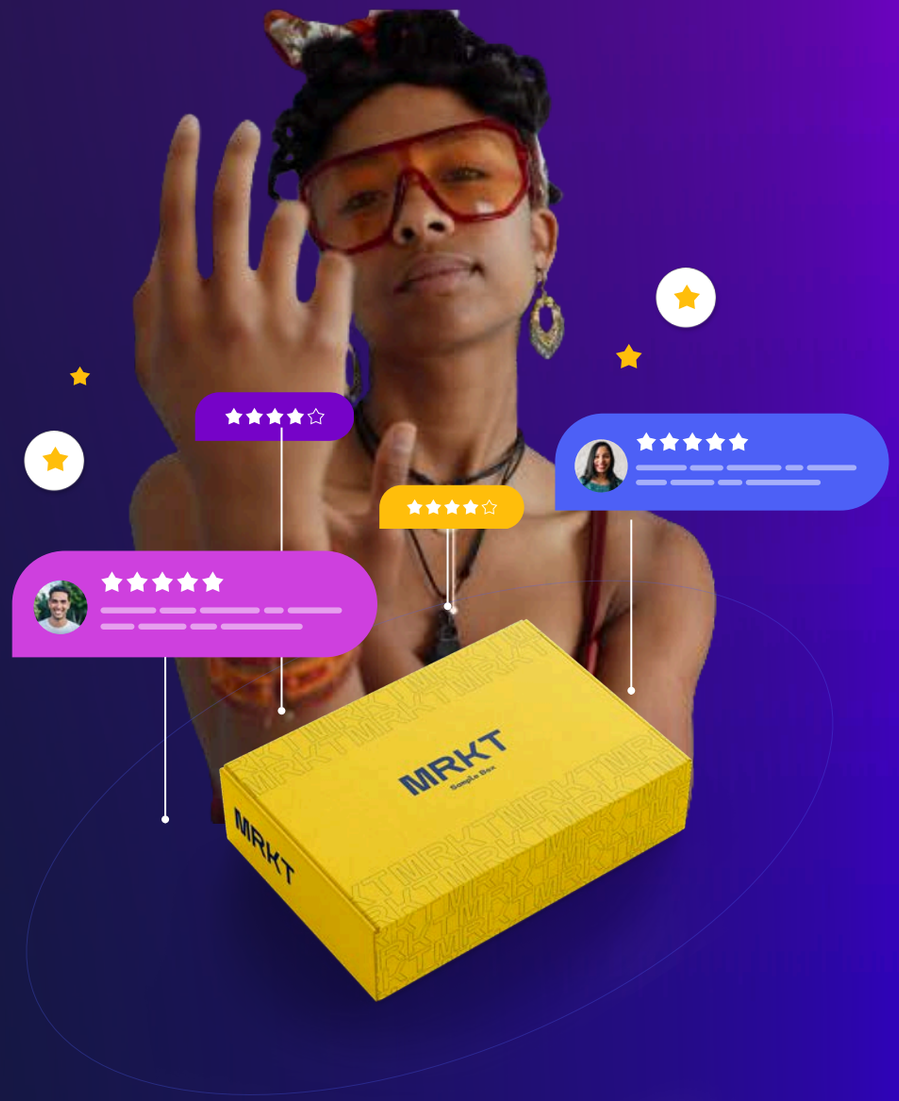
The third and final piece of the Triple-A framework is abundance.

The more information AI has about a product, the more confidently it can recommend it. A product with three reviews gives AI very little to work with. A product with three hundred? That gives AI a variety of information to understand the product across a range of users and use cases.

But abundance is not just about volume—it's about recency and, importantly, quality.

AI systems are sensitive to content freshness and content depth. A product with five hundred reviews from three years ago tells AI less about how that product performs today than a product with fifty reviews from the last six months. Similarly, a product with fifty reviews filled with context, specificity, consistency, and authenticity cues (including balanced critique) is much more valuable to AI than five hundred generic reviews. This depth is crucial for AI to understand real customer sentiment—and it's found in UGC alone.





THE ROLE OF SAMPLING

Content volume can be a challenge for many brands, especially those with large catalogs. If this is you, product sampling is a tool you need in your belt.

A well-designed sampling program puts your products in the hands of real consumers and generates the contextual, experiential user-generated content that AI depends on. It drives both volume and recency simultaneously, and it tends to generate higher-quality reviews than organic collection alone.

Sampling is particularly valuable for new product launches where the absence of reviews is most acute. A new product with no reviews is essentially invisible to AI at the moment when you most need visibility—right at launch. A targeted sampling program can fix that.

Does AI have enough of your content?

This quick assessment will help identify whether you are providing AI with enough consistent content to make it confident in surfacing your products.

Have your sampling program manager answer each question

Score your brand 2 for yes, 1 for partially or unsure, and 0 for no

- **Do my hero products have sufficient high-quality review volume—at minimum in the double digits—to give AI a range of contexts to draw from?**
- **Do I have meaningful review coverage across my full catalog, not just my top SKUs?**
- **Do I have a sampling program in place that actively drives review volume, recency, and depth—particularly for new product launches?**
- **Are my reviews recent? Does a significant portion of my review volume come from the last six months?**
- **Am I tracking review recency as a performance metric alongside total volume, and reporting on it regularly?**

Scoring: *If you scored…*

8–10	You're giving AI a rich pool of data to draw from across your catalog.
5–7	You have moderate abundance—you likely have strong, deep coverage on hero products but thin or stale content further down your catalog.
0–4	You have critical abundance gaps—improving review volume, recency, and depth should be an immediate strategic priority. A sampling program is your fastest lever to pull to improve all three.

Priority action:

Run a catalog audit by pulling your full product list and flagging any SKU with fewer than ten reviews or no reviews in the past six months—these are the products that are invisible to AI regardless of how strong the rest of your content strategy is.

If the list is long, that's your case for a sampling program.

WHY FIRST MOVERS WILL WIN

The AI shelf is here, and the brands that will win it won't necessarily be the ones with the biggest budgets. They'll be the ones that recognize what the shift actually requires—and move decisively to meet the moment.

This shift isn't as complicated as it might seem and it doesn't require reinventing your content strategy from scratch. In most cases, it requires taking something you've already invested in—user-generated content—and making it work as hard as possible for your brand.

Accessible to AI.
Authentic enough to be trusted.
Abundant enough to matter.

Do these three things well, and a single investment optimizes for the two audiences standing between your product and a sale: AI and the shopper.

Here's something else worth sitting with: The brands that move first on this will be hard to catch. Studies show that AI models prefer to cite what they already know. Once a brand becomes the "default answer" in an AI platform, they become difficult to dislodge by a competitor.

Brands that build rich, accessible, authentic UGC ecosystems now will accumulate a content advantage that compounds over time—making their products easier to surface, more accurately represented, and more trusted by AI and shoppers with every passing month.

The window to be a first mover is open, but it won't stay open indefinitely. Use the tools you have now to take advantage of this opportunity.

The playbook is in your hands. The AI shelf is waiting.

"Don't fear it. Get curious. Experiment. Learn. Then move fast, and make sure you have the right partners beside you."
—Doug Straton,
CMO at Bazaarvoice

Take the next step on your AI learning journey by watching our masterclass on testing and measuring generative engine optimization (GEO) success here.