



FREE GUIDE • 2026

The Dark Funnel Field Guide

94% of your buyers pick a favorite vendor before they ever speak to you. Here is where that happens — and what to do about it.

EIGHT CHANNELS • CURRENT DATA • A 30-MINUTE AUDIT

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THE SHORT VERSION

The game is decided before you are invited

If you read nothing else in this guide, read this page. Three findings, all from 2025–2026 research, that together explain why so much B2B pipeline is flat despite record marketing spend.

94%

of B2B purchasing groups had already identified a **preferred vendor before first contact** with any seller — and that vendor won roughly **80% of the deals**.

6sense, 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Report • 4,000+ buyers

Your sales conversation is not where the decision gets made. It is where a decision that was already made gets confirmed. By the time a buyer books a call, the persuasion happened somewhere you were not watching.

And the buyer would rather you were not there at all. Gartner found **67% of B2B buyers now prefer a rep-free buying experience**, and 70% prefer a completely digital, self-service journey. That number rose six points in nine months. It is moving in one direction.

Meanwhile the front door moved. In March 2026 G2 found **51% of B2B software buyers now start research with an AI chatbot more often than with Google** — up from 29% eleven months earlier — and 69% said a chatbot's guidance led them to a different vendor than they would otherwise have chosen.

WHAT ALL THREE HAVE IN COMMON

None of it shows up in your analytics. The podcast episode, the Slack thread, the peer recommendation, the ChatGPT session — every one of them arrives at your website as **Direct traffic with no history**. This is the dark funnel, and it is now where most of the buying journey lives.

95% of B2B buyers are not in the market for your product at any given moment. Only about 5% are actively buying this quarter.

PROF. JOHN DAWES, EHRENBERG-BASS INSTITUTE, FOR THE LINKEDIN B2B INSTITUTE

Which is the point. Dark funnel work is not lead generation. It is building the memory that makes you the preferred vendor when the other 95% finally enter the market.

DEFINITION

What is the dark funnel?

IN ONE SENTENCE

The **dark funnel** is every place your buyers get informed, compare notes with peers and form opinions about vendors — that no attribution software, pixel or tracking tool can see. The term was coined by 6sense.

Here is what it looks like in practice. A VP of Operations hears you on a podcast during a commute. Three weeks later she reads a post from an independent analyst who mentions your approach. She asks in a private Slack community who people are using, and two members name you. She asks ChatGPT to compare the top options in your category, and you appear in the answer. She visits your pricing page in an incognito window.

Five meaningful touches. Your analytics recorded one — as Direct / None.

What you can see

- Paid clicks and their conversions
- Organic search sessions
- Email opens and clicks
- Gated form fills
- Sessions with a referrer

The measurable minority — and increasingly the *last* step, not the causal one.

What you cannot see

- Podcast listens and what they triggered
- Private Slack, Discord, WhatsApp threads
- Peer recommendations and referrals
- Conversations at events and dinners
- AI chatbot research sessions
- Content forwarded person to person

Where preference is actually formed.

Why most marketers treat this as a problem

Because it breaks the dashboard. A channel that cannot be attributed cannot be defended in a budget meeting, so it gets cut in favor of something that reports a number — even when that number describes a smaller and later part of the journey.

THAT IS THE MISTAKE, AND IT IS YOUR OPENING

The dark funnel is not a measurement failure to be solved. It is a competitive position to be occupied — and it is under-occupied precisely *because* it does not report cleanly. Your competitors are optimizing the visible 40% while the decision gets made in the other 60%.

THE MAP

Where the dark funnel lives

Eight channels. The eighth barely existed three years ago and is now where a great many buying journeys begin.

1 Podcasts

Long-form, high-trust, entirely unattributable. Guesting borrows an audience; hosting builds one.

2 Influencers, creators & independent analysts

People whose opinion your buyers already seek out. They operate across every other channel on this list.

3 Organic social

Where a personal brand outperforms a company page, and where most sharing happens by copied link.

4 Private communities & groups

Slack, Discord, LinkedIn and Facebook groups. Where "who are you using?" is asked and answered.

5 Events — in-person and virtual

The hallway, the dinner, the small roundtable. Memory-making at a density no other channel matches.

6 PR & media relations

Third-party validation — and, increasingly, the raw material AI models cite when asked about your category.

7 Word of mouth & employee advocacy

The oldest channel and still the most decisive. Your team is your largest untapped distribution network.

8 AI answer engines **NEW**

ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot, AI Overviews. The buyer asks a machine for a shortlist. You are on it or you are not.

READ THIS BEFORE YOU PICK

These are not a checklist. Choosing all eight is the most common way teams fail at this — thin presence everywhere reads as absence. **Three channels run properly beat eight run badly.**

CHANNEL NOTES · 1-4

How to work them

1 Podcasts

Edison Research's *Infinite Dial 2026* puts monthly US podcast listening at **58%** — and **68% among ages 35-54**, the core B2B decision-making bracket.

- **Pitch the audience's problem, not your product.** Hosts book guests who make them look good.
- **Target by audience fit, never download count.** 400 listeners who are all your ICP beat 40,000 who are not.
- **Repurpose every appearance** into clips, posts and a newsletter section — or you wasted the booking.
- **Ask for audience makeup, not just downloads.** A host who cannot name their listeners' titles and industries is not worth your time.

2 Influencers & independent analysts

Ogilvy found **75% of B2B organizations** already run influencer marketing in some form, and 92% say hyper-targeted influencer work drives consideration and acquisition.

- **Vet for audience overlap, not reach.** "How many of the right people, and do they act on what this person says?"
- **Engage for months before you ask.** Read their work, comment substantively, share it with your own take.
- **Pay for expertise, not posts.** Advisory retainers and co-created research beat one-off sponsored content.
- **Give them something real:** early product access, proprietary data, customer introductions.

3 Organic social

Not a broadcast channel — a place to be recognized repeatedly by a specific group, and the main source of content that gets forwarded where you cannot follow.

- **People outperform logos.** Build the personal profiles of your founders and experts first.
- **Publish to help, not to convert.** Product announcements and job postings are not thought leadership.
- **Pick one platform and dominate it.** Five platforms at 20% effort is how teams waste a year.
- **Reply as seriously as you post.** Comments on other people's posts reach the same buyers in five minutes.

4 Private communities & groups

The darkest rooms in the dark funnel — and where vendor shortlists get built and pruned out loud.

- **Join as a person, not a logo.** Communities eject brand accounts and remember which company sent them.
- **Give for 90 days before you take.** Answer questions with no product in the answer — including when the honest answer is a competitor.
- **Budget 3-5 hours a week from someone senior.** If you cannot commit that, do not start.
- **Track themes, not clicks.** Log the recurring questions. That log becomes your content roadmap.

THE MISTAKES THAT WASTE A YEAR

Podcasts — 30 bookings, same rehearsed pitch on each. **Influencers** — a B2C playbook: follower counts and one-post rates. **Social** — posting only from the company page. **Communities** — a junior marketer in a dozen groups with a post quota.

CHANNEL NOTES · 5-7

How to work them

5 Events — in-person and virtual

Everything valuable about an event happens away from the booth. The booth is the visible, measurable, expensive part — and the least productive.

- **Buy the stage, not the stand.** A speaking slot delivers more authority than a booth at a fraction of the cost.
- **The 8-12 person dinner is the highest-ROI format in B2B events.** Curated guests, no pitch, one good discussion topic.
- **Turn one event into a quarter of content** — a point of view before, observations during, a synthesis piece after.
- **Stop judging events by badge scans.** Scans measure booth foot traffic, the part that matters least.
- **Negotiate sponsorships differently.** A booth and a logo with no stage time and no dinner buys you visibility to people walking past.

6 PR & media relations

The traditional case still holds — visibility, credibility, differentiation. But there is a new reason PR matters more than it did.

- **Earned media is now AI source material.** When a buyer asks ChatGPT who the leading vendors are, the model draws on trade press, review sites and analyst commentary — *not* your website copy.
- **Own proprietary data.** Original research nobody else has is the most reliable way to earn B2B coverage.
- **Pitch trade press before tier-one.** The niche publication your buyers read beats a general outlet that reaches nobody in your category.
- **Feed the review sites.** G2 found 45% of buyers say review-site citations are what makes an AI answer feel trustworthy.
- **Stop measuring PR by press release volume.** Nobody reads them — not buyers, not journalists, and the models weight them lightly against editorial coverage.

7 Word of mouth & employee advocacy

You cannot execute word of mouth. You can engineer the surface area — how many of your people are visibly, usefully present where buyers are.

- **Start with volunteers, never a mandate.** Five enthusiastic people beat fifty compelled ones, and the difference is visible in the writing.
- **Supply raw material, not finished posts.** Twelve employees posting identical copy on one morning reads like a bot farm.
- **Give them two hours a week on the clock.** Advocacy that happens in personal time quietly stops.
- **Recognize it publicly.** Celebrate the person whose post started a conversation with a target account. What gets celebrated gets repeated.
- **Culture before tooling.** Buying an advocacy platform before building an advocacy culture is how the program dies.

WHAT THESE THREE HAVE IN COMMON

All three are worth more than their reporting suggests, and all three get cut first in a bad quarter — precisely *because* the reporting undersells them. Decide now how you will defend them in a budget meeting. Page 10 gives you the instruments.

8

AI answer engines

The newest channel, the least visible that has ever existed, and the one most B2B teams have no position in at all.

51%

of B2B software buyers now begin research with an **AI chatbot more often than Google** — up from 29% eleven months earlier.

G2 Buyer Behavior research, March 2026 · n=1,076

94%

of buyers used **large language models** to synthesize and organize their research.

6sense, 2025 Buyer Experience Report

33%

purchased from a vendor they had **never previously heard of**, found via an AI chatbot.

G2, March 2026

Look at the direction of travel rather than the absolute numbers. AI-first research went from roughly a quarter of buyers to more than half in under a year. And that last figure matters most: **the machine is not merely confirming existing shortlists — it is writing them.**

WHY THIS IS THE DARKEST CHANNEL YET

A buyer's ChatGPT session produces no impression, no click, no referrer and no log you will ever access. They may run twenty prompts comparing you against three competitors, form a firm opinion, and arrive at your pricing page as **Direct traffic with no prior history**. Every touch that mattered is invisible — including whether you were mentioned at all.

The three states you can be in

STATE	WHAT HAPPENS
Cited favorably	You appear in the shortlist with accurate positioning. G2 found 85% of buyers view a vendor more favorably when an AI chatbot mentions it.
Cited inaccurately	You appear with wrong pricing, outdated features or a mischaracterized use case. 64% of buyers hit inaccurate AI recommendations often — and act on them anyway.
Absent	You are not in the answer. The buyer never learns you exist. No impression, no bounce, nothing at all. This is the default state for most vendors.

Most companies have no idea which state they are in. The next page fixes that in about thirty minutes.

EXERCISE • 30 MINUTES

The AI visibility audit

The single highest-value thirty minutes in this guide. Do it before you change anything else.

STEP 1 • RUN THE PROMPTS

Open **ChatGPT**, **Perplexity**, **Gemini** and **Copilot**. In each, start a fresh session with no memory of you and run these five prompts:

- 1 "What are the best [your category] vendors for [your ICP]?"
- 2 "Compare [your company] vs [competitor A] vs [competitor B]."
- 3 "What do customers say about [your company]?"
- 4 "What are the downsides of [your company]?"
- 5 "How much does [your company] cost?"

STEP 2 • RECORD WHAT YOU FIND

ENGINE	DO YOU APPEAR?	IS IT ACCURATE?	SOURCES CITED
ChatGPT	Y / N	Y / N	_____
Perplexity	Y / N	Y / N	_____
Gemini	Y / N	Y / N	_____
Copilot	Y / N	Y / N	_____

That last column is the important one. Those are the properties the models are actually reading about your category — and therefore your real target list.

What to do with the answer

- **Third-party sources outrank your own site.** Review profiles, trade press and analyst commentary do more for AI visibility than another landing page.
- **Publish specifics, not adjectives.** Named integrations, real numbers, defined use cases, honest constraints. Models cite concrete claims and skip vague ones.
- **You cannot edit the model — you correct the sources it reads.** Fix your factual pages, get review profiles current, then re-audit in 60 days.

RE-RUN IT QUARTERLY

Movement here is a leading indicator for a channel that now starts more than half of all B2B software research. It costs half an hour and almost nobody is doing it.

GETTING STARTED

Pick three. Not eight.

Choose where your buyers are *and* where you have the resources to operate. Both halves are required — and the second is where most plans quietly break.

Three questions per channel

- 1 **Are our buyers demonstrably there?** Not "probably." Ask ten customers where they learned about the category. Their answers beat your assumptions every time.
- 2 **Can we sustain it for twelve months?** With current headcount, current budget, current executive patience. A channel abandoned at month four is worse than never entered.
- 3 **Do we have someone credible to put in it?** These channels reward genuine expertise. If nobody on your team can hold their own in that room, you need a different room or a different person.

A channel needs a **yes to all three**. Two out of three is how you end up with a dormant podcast and a Slack account nobody has opened since Q2.

Realistic entry cost

CHANNEL	WEEKLY TIME	TIME TO FIRST SIGNAL
Podcast guesting	3-4 hrs	2-3 months
Hosting a podcast	8-10 hrs	6-9 months
Influencer relationships	4-6 hrs	4-6 months
Organic social	5-7 hrs	3-6 months
Communities	3-5 hrs	3-6 months
Events	Bursts + prep	1-2 events
PR & media	2-4 hrs	3-6 months
Employee advocacy	2 hrs + team time	2-4 months
AI answer engines	2 hrs	3-6 months

SAY THE NO OUT LOUD

Write down the channels you are **not** doing this year, and why. Undocumented "no" decisions get relitigated every time someone reads an article on a plane — and that drift is how three focused channels become eight neglected ones.

MEASUREMENT

What to measure instead

You will not get clean attribution here. Stop trying. Measure correlation, direction and what buyers tell you directly — and be rigorous about it, because rigor is what buys you twelve months of patience.

THE SINGLE HIGHEST-VALUE CHANGE YOU CAN MAKE THIS WEEK

Add an **open-text** "How did you hear about us?" field to every high-intent form on your site, and ask the same question in the first sales call. It is the only reliable instrument you have for measuring the dark funnel, it costs nothing, and within a quarter it will tell you which channels are actually working.

Open text — not a dropdown. A dropdown only ever confirms the channels you already believed in.

The four instruments that work

- 1 **Self-reported attribution.** The question above, logged in your CRM every time. Your best instrument by a wide margin.
- 2 **Website leading indicators.** Direct traffic, branded search volume, demo and pricing page views over time. Rising direct traffic with flat paid spend is dark funnel work showing up.
- 3 **Channel-level proxies.** Podcast episode downloads and audience makeup, community mentions of your name, inbound requests that reference a specific piece of content. Not attribution — evidence.
- 4 **AI answer visibility.** The audit on page 8, run quarterly and logged.

THE METRIC TO RETIRE

Last-touch attribution on any of these channels. It will credit "Direct" and "Organic Search" for work done by a podcast eight months earlier — and then you will cut the podcast. That is not a measurement error. It is a strategy error caused by a measurement error.

SET THE EXPECTATION ON DAY ONE

Tell leadership in advance that this gets judged at **month twelve**, not month four, and show them the data on page 2 to explain why. Teams that abandon dark funnel work early almost always do so because nobody set that expectation at the start.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

How dark is your funnel?

Ten questions. Tick every one you can answer **yes** to honestly. Scoring is on the right.

- ☐ We ask "**How did you hear about us?**" as an open-text field on every high-intent form, and someone reads the answers.
- ☐ We know what our buyers see when they ask ChatGPT or Perplexity about our category, because we have checked in the last 90 days.
- ☐ We can name the specific communities, podcasts and newsletters our best customers actually consume — because we asked them.
- ☐ At least one senior person spends real, protected weekly hours participating where our buyers gather.
- ☐ We publish at least one substantial pillar piece a month, on a rhythm we have held for six months or more.
- ☐ Our content passes the test: it helps a buyer solve a problem *without* requiring them to buy from us.
- ☐ Named employees — not just the company page — post their own views about our industry regularly.
- ☐ Our website lets a stranger with no history request pricing or a demo in under thirty seconds.
- ☐ We have relationships with independent analysts or industry voices that predate any ask we have made of them.
- ☐ Leadership has agreed to judge this work on a twelve-month horizon, and knows why.

0–3 • INVISIBLE

Your buyers are forming opinions about you with no input from you. The good news: the first three fixes here are free and take a week.

4–7 • PRESENT

You are doing real work but it is uneven — usually strong content with no distribution, or presence with no measurement. Focus beats addition.

8–10 • PREFERRED

You are building the position competitors cannot buy in a quarter. The work now is depth and patience, not new channels.

IF YOU SCORED UNDER 4, START HERE — IN THIS ORDER

1. Add the open-text attribution question to every form this week. **2.** Run the 30-minute AI audit on page 8. **3.** Ask ten customers where they learned about your category. Those three cost nothing and will change what you do next quarter.

REFERENCE

Sources

Every statistic in this guide, with its publisher, methodology and date. Verify anything you intend to put in front of your own leadership — and check whether a newer edition has been published before you present it.

6sense — 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Report

Published November 2025. Over 4,000 B2B buyers across North America, EMEA and APAC. Source for the 94% preferred-vendor figure, the ~80% win rate and the 94% LLM-usage figure. 6sense also coined the term "dark funnel."

6sense.com/science-of-b2b/buyer-experience-report-2025/

Gartner — "Gartner Sales Survey Finds 67% of B2B Buyers Prefer a Rep-Free Experience"

Published 9 March 2026. Survey of 646 B2B buyers, conducted August–September 2025.

gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2026-03-09-gartner-sales-survey-finds-67-percent-of-b2b-buyers-prefer-a-rep-free-experience

Gartner — "Gartner Survey Finds 69% of B2B Buyers Turn to Sales Reps to Validate AI-Generated Insights"

Published 20 May 2026. Survey of 645 B2B buyers, conducted August–September 2025. Source for the 70% self-service figure.

gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2026-05-20-gartner-survey-finds-sixty-nine-percent-of-b-two-b-buyers-turn-to-sales-reps-to-validate-ai-generated-insights

G2 — Buyer Behavior research on AI chatbots in software buying

Published 2026. Survey of 1,076 B2B software buyers and decision-makers across North America, EMEA and APAC, conducted March 2026, plus 39 qualitative interviews with B2B software marketers. Source for the 51% AI-first, 69% vendor-switch, 33% unknown-vendor, 85% favorability, 64% inaccuracy and 45% review-site-citation figures.

company.g2.com/news/buyer-behavior-2026

Edison Research — The Infinite Dial 2026

Sponsored by SiriusXM Media. 2,050 respondents aged 12+, interviewed January 2026. Source for the 58% monthly and 68% ages-35–54 podcast listening figures.

edisonresearch.com

Ogilvy — "Influencing Business: The Global Rise of B2B Influencer Marketing"

Published September 2023 with Opinionum. Source for the 75% adoption and 92% consideration/acquisition figures. *Note: the oldest source used here; treat the adoption figure as a floor rather than a current reading.*

ogilvy.com/ideas/influencing-business-global-rise-b2b-influencer-marketing

Prof. John Dawes, Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, for the LinkedIn B2B Institute

The 95-5 rule: approximately 95% of B2B buyers are not in-market at any given time. Widely reported; see Marketing Week's coverage.

marketingweek.com/ehrenberg-bass-linkedin-b2b-buyers/

Edelman & LinkedIn — 2025 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report

Published July 2025. Background source on "hidden buyers" — the 71% with little or no direct sales interaction, and the 64% who trust thought leadership over product collateral.

edelman.com/expertise/Business-Marketing/2025-b2b-thought-leadership-report



WHAT'S NEXT

Want to know where you actually show up?

Most teams read a guide like this, agree with it, and change nothing — because the hard part is not the ideas, it is deciding which three channels are yours and defending that decision for twelve months.

That is the conversation I have with clients. In about forty-five minutes we can cover:

- **Where you currently show up** when a buyer asks an AI engine about your category — and what is being said about you.
- **Which three channels** are genuinely worth your resources, and which ones you should decline this year.
- **What to measure** so the work survives the next budget review.

No pitch deck. If there is nothing useful for me to do, I will tell you that.

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