Beyond SEO: How Reputation Wins Business in the Age of AI

A Statistical Study by Sogolytics Research

October 2025

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Executive Summary

Consumers now treat online reputation as a standard filter before purchase. In a Sogolytics study of 1,198 participants, more than half reported checking reputation often or always, while only 8% said they never do. Younger consumers are the most consistent, making reputation a critical barrier or gateway to engagement.

Reviews dominate decision-making. Nearly three out of four consumers check Google reviews, and 63% say it has the greatest influence on their final decision. Consumers value recency, detail, and authenticity in reviews, and many question credibility when profiles show only positive feedback.

AI is an emerging force. One in five consumers already use ChatGPT or Google AI to research businesses, and 16% say AI recommendations most influence their choices. Usage is highest among 25-34-year-olds, signaling that AI-driven trust filters will expand rapidly.

Recovery after a negative incident requires visible action. Consumers expect businesses to demonstrate that problems are fixed, explain what happened, and improve customer service. Apologies or discounts help but are insufficient on their own.

Strategic implications for businesses:

- **Protect visibility:**
  Keep information current across channels, including AI tools.
- **Build credibility:**
  Ensure transparency, respond quickly, and highlight ethical practices.
- **Manage algorithms:**
  Monitor how AI systems represent the brand and correct inaccuracies.

Reputation is no longer only about human reviews. AI now amplifies both positive and negative narratives, accelerating the impact of trust-building or trust erosion. Businesses that act now to manage reputation across platforms will be better positioned to compete in an AI-driven market.

Introduction

> **Reputation has always mattered. What is new is the speed, the visibility, and the role of AI in shaping what people see first.**

Online reputation now decides who gets considered and who gets skipped. Search, reviews, and artificial intelligence (AI) summaries set the first impression long before a visit or a purchase. **A single gap or a single viral story can change the story of a brand.**

Customer reviews materially influence purchase decisions, with consumers more likely to trust and buy from businesses that feature reviews. The volume of online reviews surged and remains above pre-pandemic levels, reinforcing how visible feedback shapes choices at scale. At the same time, **brand and reputation damage ranks among the top global risks**, highlighting how fast a trust problem can turn into a business problem.

The cost of getting it wrong is rising fast. Today, **72% of business leaders believe that reputation will have a greater impact on their company's success than profit margins within the next five years.** This reflects the growing weight of trust, transparency, and ESG factors in shaping long-term performance.

At the same time, the market for reputation management itself is expanding rapidly. The global Enterprise Reputation Management Services market is projected to grow from **$4.3 billion in 2023 to $9.8 billion by 2032**, nearly doubling in less than a decade. This growth underscores how much organizations are now investing to safeguard their image in a digital environment where reviews, AI outputs, and viral stories can reshape perception overnight.

This report was designed to map that landscape from the consumer perspective. It asks how often people check reputation, which sources they trust, how AI is changing discovery, and what businesses must do to protect and rebuild trust. **The goal is simple. Turn consumer behavior into a practical playbook for action.**

What follows connects the dots. How consumers check reputation today. Where reviews help and where they fail. How AI is becoming a new filter. Why viral stories carry a longer tail in an AI world. And the concrete moves businesses can make now.

Methodology

The insights in this report are based on a nationwide survey of 1,198 U.S. adults conducted by Sogolytics in 2025. Responses were collected online from a diverse cross-section of participants, with age groups aligned to U.S. census data and a near-even gender split (49% male, 51% female). Participants also represented varied education and income levels to ensure balanced demographic coverage. Results were analyzed using both aggregate and segmented data to highlight differences across demographic groups.

1198 US adults

Demographics

Age

Gender

Education

Income

Question Types

Single-choice

Multi-choice

Scaled Questions

Topics

AI

Consumer Habits

Online Reputation Management

How Consumers Check Reputation

Checking reputation before choosing

Online reputation has become **a standard filter in consumer decision-making**. Before trying a new business, most people pause to see what others are saying. Only 8% say they never check, while **more than half (56%) report checking often or always**. Another 28% fall in the middle, checking sometimes. These findings confirm that reputation is now a key part of the path to purchase.

How often consumers check reputation

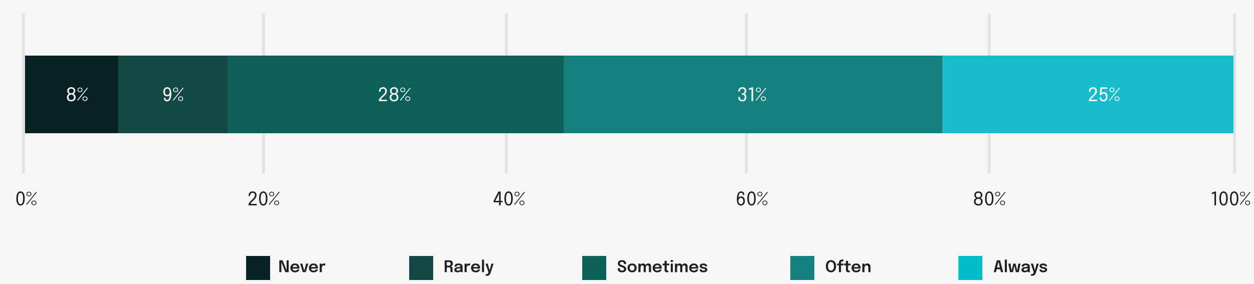

Figure 1: This graph shows how often consumers check a business's online reputation before deciding.

Age differences are clear. The group most consistently relying on reputation for consumer decision making is **adults aged 25-34, with 70% saying they check often or always**. Young adults aged 18-24 are close behind, with about 55% treating reputation as a regular filter. Older age groups show more variation. Among those aged 55-64, 12% say they never check and another 14% say they rarely check. Still, many in this group fall into the middle, with 29% saying they sometimes check before trying a new business.

Patterns also appear across education levels. Those with bachelor's, master's, or professional degrees are more likely to say they check often or always. Those with less schooling lean more toward occasional checks, with fewer reporting that they check every time.

The overall trend is clear. **Reputation-checking is widespread across the board, but younger adults and those with advanced education tend to make it a consistent habit.**

Digital footprint as a trust marker

For many, the absence of an online presence is a warning sign. 7% of the survey participants say it is a deal breaker, and another 20% call it a red flag that makes them cautious. Still, not everyone demands a digital footprint. About 23% say they could overlook it if recommended by someone they know or if no other options are available.

When no online presence becomes a risk

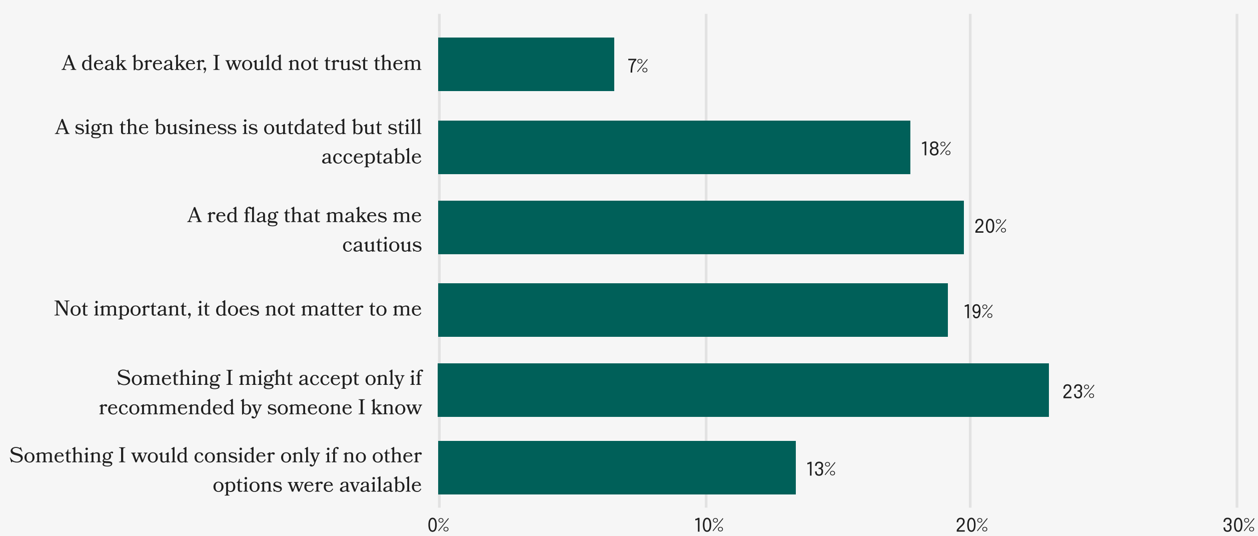

Figure 2: This graph shows how consumers interpret a missing digital footprint.

Recommendations carry weight across all age groups, but the underlying expectations differ. **Among 18-24-year-olds, 13% say no online presence is a deal breaker** and 23% call it a red flag. Only 14% in this group say it does not matter. By contrast, older adults are much more forgiving. 29% of those 65+ say a missing presence does not matter. This highlights a clear divide, **while word of mouth can offset the lack of a footprint for everyone, younger consumers still expect businesses to show up online.**

Platforms that shape first impressions

When searching, Google reviews dominate as the go-to source, both in frequency of use and in final influence. **71% of consumers check Google reviews, and 63% say it is the single most important factor in their final decision.** Yelp and Facebook matter but sit further behind, checked by 29% and 41% of consumers, and cited as most influential by only 13% and 22%.

Online sources consumers check before choosing a business

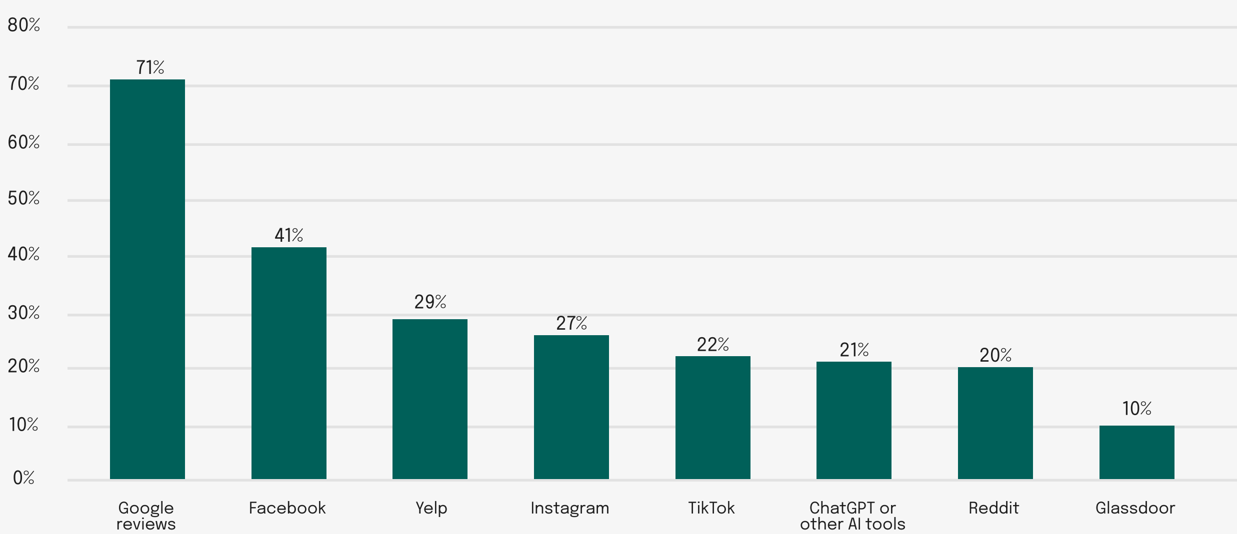

Figure 3: This chart shows the online platforms people rely on when researching businesses, highlighting the range of sites that shape first impressions. Because multiple answers per participant are possible, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

Social media platforms add another dimension, especially among younger adults. **More than half of those aged 18-24 check Instagram (51%) and TikTok (57%) before choosing where to shop, eat, or visit.** Among older adults, these numbers drop sharply, with only 7% of those aged 55-64 and 5% of those aged 65+ checking Instagram. This split underscores how reputation discovery is evolving from traditional review sites to visual, social-first channels for younger audiences.

Top sources influencing final decisions

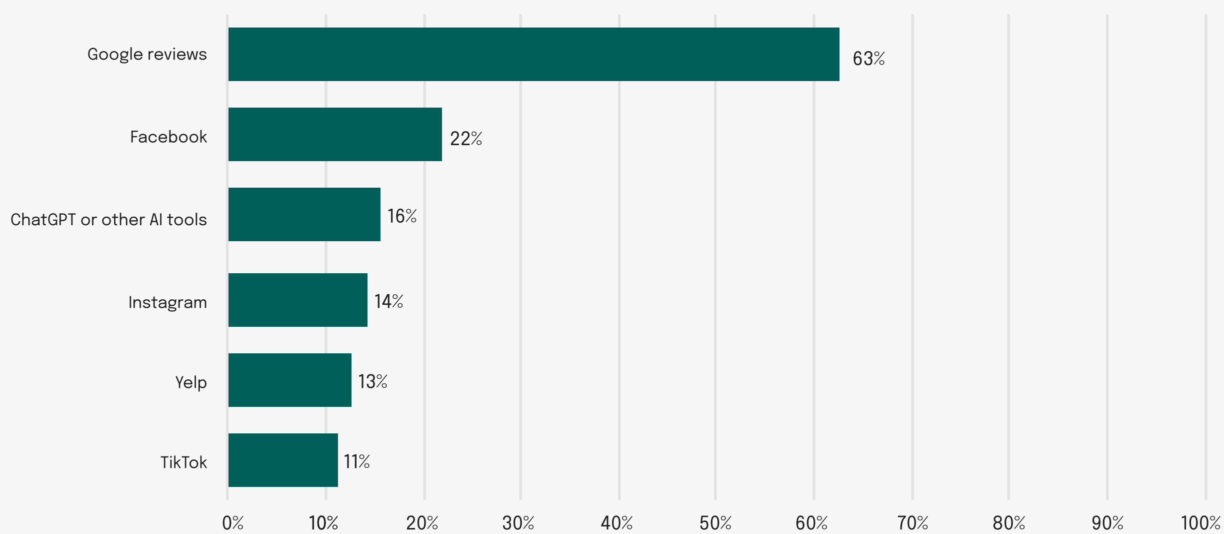

Figure 4: This chart shows the top five sources consumers say have the greatest influence on their final decision when choosing a business. Because multiple answers per participant are possible, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

AI tools are also establishing themselves as serious new players. One in five consumers (21%) now use ChatGPT or similar platforms to research businesses, and 16% say AI recommendations have the greatest influence on their final decision. Usage is strongest among those aged 25-34 (30%) and 35-44 (35%), compared with only 7% of those aged 55-64 and 8% of those aged 65+. Men are also more likely than women to lean on AI, with 27% of men reporting use compared with 16% of women.

The picture that emerges is one of layered trust signals. Google remains the central gatekeeper, but AI is already rivaling long-standing platforms like Yelp and Facebook. Younger and more digitally engaged consumers are building their decisions around a wider mix of inputs, from Instagram and TikTok to AI-generated suggestions.

The Limits of Reviews in Shaping Reputation

What people look for in reviews

Not all reviews carry the same weight. **Recency is the top factor, with 46% of consumers saying how recent the reviews are matters most.** Close behind, 40% say details in the comments influence their trust. These preferences show that people want both up-to-date information and enough context to understand the experience.

What matters most in reviews

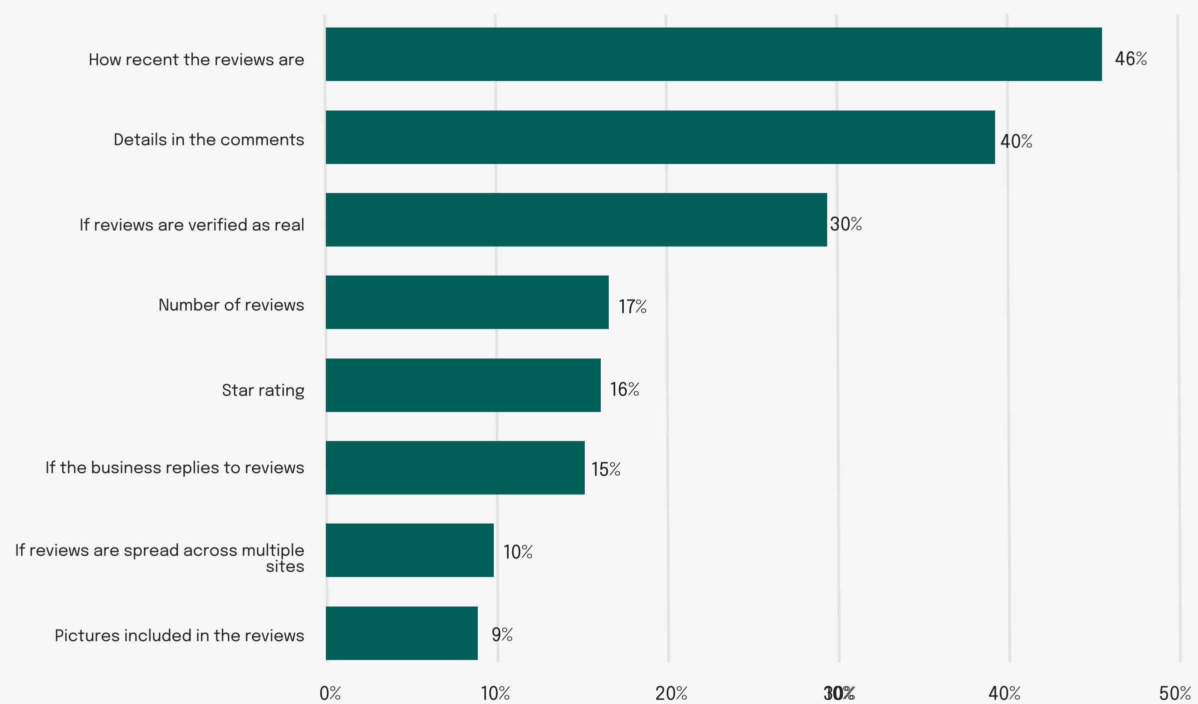

Figure 5: This graph shows the top factors people consider when looking at reviews. Participants were asked to select up to two options, and because multiple answers were allowed, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

Verification also stands out, with 30% looking for signs that reviews are real. Other factors play a smaller role. Some people glance at review counts, star ratings, or whether the business replies, while a smaller share notice details like photos or reviews spread across multiple sites. These signals add credibility but rarely drive trust on their own.

Gender differences appear in what signals people value most. **Women place more emphasis on recency (48% vs 43%) and verification (32% vs 27%),** and are also more likely to notice star ratings and photos. Men lean more on volume, with 21% saying the number of reviews matters compared with 13% of women.

Education shapes how people read reviews. **Those with higher degrees focus more on detail, with 50% of master's and doctorate holders saying details in comments matter compared with 31% of those with less than high school.** People with less schooling pay more attention to quick signals like star ratings, with 22% of the least educated relying on them compared with only 8% of doctorate holders. Recency is strongest in the middle groups, where about half of those with some college or an associate's degree say it matters most. Replies and verification stay fairly steady across education levels without big swings.

Weak spots in review credibility

Reviews are powerful, but they are not perfect. **When every review is positive, 38% of consumers immediately question whether they are real.** Another 18% suspect that businesses may be deleting or hiding negative feedback. Only 28% say they would actually trust a business more in that situation, showing that overly polished reputations can backfire.

Skepticism toward perfect reviews

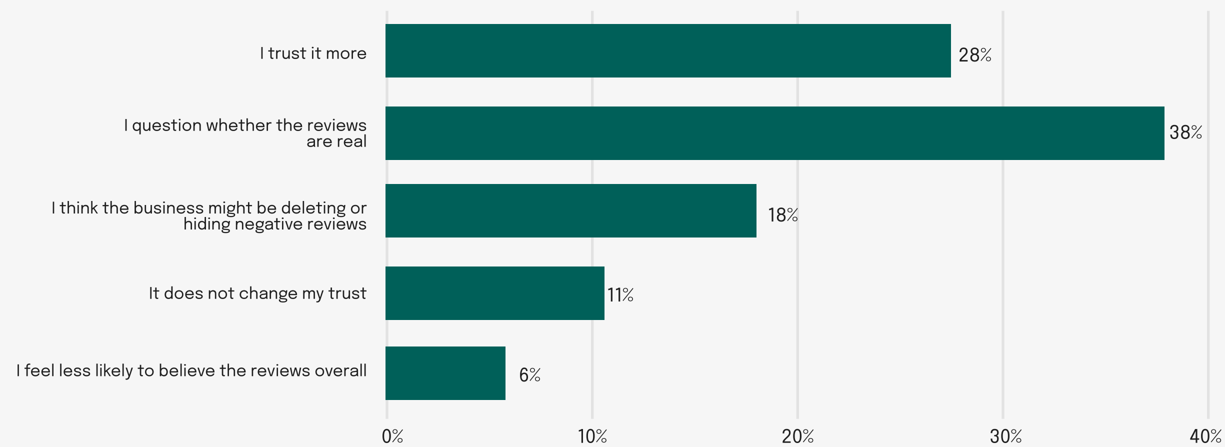

Figure 6: This graph shows how people respond when all reviews for a business are positive with no negatives.

Silence also erodes trust. **When a business does not respond to negative reviews, 26% of consumers say they lose trust and look elsewhere, while 39% say they still consider the business but with caution**. Only 14% say replies do not matter at all, and 21% weigh the importance of the issue raised.

The effect carries into future choices. **If someone leaves a negative review and receives no reply, 37% say they would not return, while another 33% say they might return only if they had no better option**. Just 19% are willing to give the business a second chance.

These weak spots show the limits of reviews as a reputation tool. Consumers know that reviews can be gamed, too many positives raise suspicion, while ignored negatives signal a lack of accountability. Star ratings give a snapshot but rarely tell the full story. The result is a system that can feel biased, incomplete, or easily manipulated.

This gap is where AI has the potential to step in. AI tools can aggregate feedback from multiple platforms, highlight recurring patterns, and flag suspicious activity. Instead of relying on a single site or a handful of reviews, consumers could turn to AI for a broader, more balanced view. **As trust in raw reviews is tested, AI may become the filter that helps people separate genuine feedback from noise.**

AI and the Future of Trust

How often consumers turn to AI

AI is still new, but it has already become part of consumer decision-making. **Overall, 26% of consumers use AI often, 25% have used it once or twice, and 49% have never used it.** This means about half of consumers have tried AI at least once.

AI enters the recommendation space

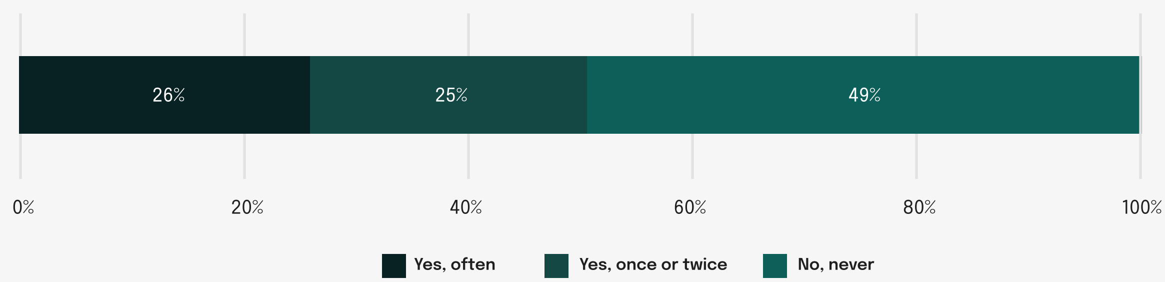

Figure 7: This graph shows how often consumers turn to AI tools like ChatGPT or Google AI for recommendations.

Age shows the sharpest divide. **Use of AI tools like ChatGPT for business recommendations peaks among adults aged 25-34 (43% often) and 35-44 (41% often).** Younger adults aged 18-24 are also active, with 34% using AI often. In contrast, usage drops off steeply among older groups. **Only 9% of those aged 55-64 and 4% of those 65+ turn to AI for recommendation often, while 68% and 81% in these groups say they never use it.**

AI use for recommendations by age group

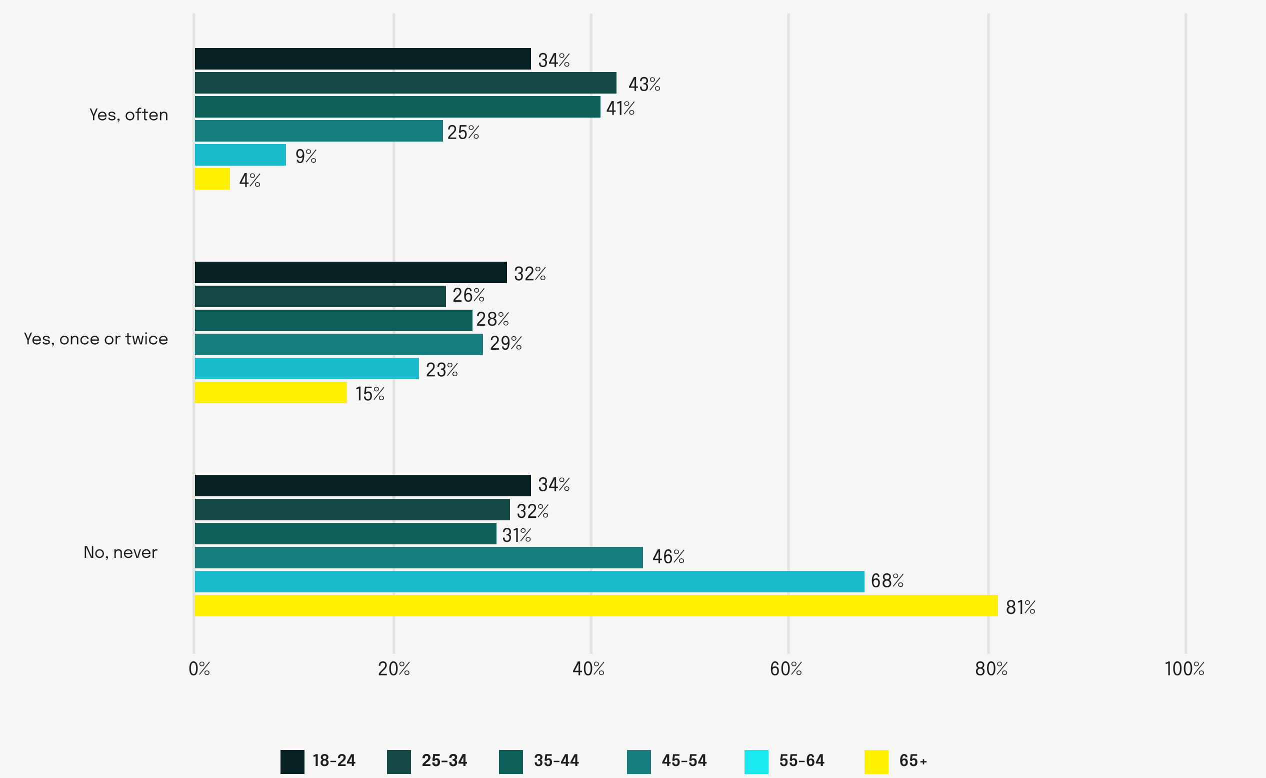

Figure 8: This graph shows how often consumers use AI tools like ChatGPT or Google AI for recommendations. The question was asked to all participants in the survey, and the results here are segmented across different age groups.

Gender differences are clear as well. **Men are nearly twice as likely as women to rely on AI recommendations often (34% vs 19%).** Women are also more likely to say they never use AI, at 56% compared with 41% of men.

Education adds another dimension. **More than half of master's degree holders (55%) say they often use AI tools for recommendations, the highest of any group.** Those with professional or doctorate degrees also report higher-than-average frequent use (33% each), though sample sizes are smaller. By contrast, less than one in five high school graduates (21%) or those with some college (17%) say they use AI often, and most in these groups fall into the "never" category.

The trend is clear. **AI adoption is strongest among adults in their late twenties to early forties, men, and those with advanced degrees**.

Older adults and less educated consumers remain much less engaged, showing that AI reputation management will matter most for businesses targeting younger, higher-educated audiences. **As AI tools become more integrated into everyday platforms, usage is likely to expand beyond these early adopters, making visibility in AI results a critical factor for long-term reputation management.**

Which industries consumers ask AI about

Among those who have used AI for recommendations, food and shopping lead the way. **60% of AI users say they have asked about restaurants, and 46% have used it to explore retail options.** Entertainment, travel, and healthcare follow as the next most common categories.

Where AI is used most in business research

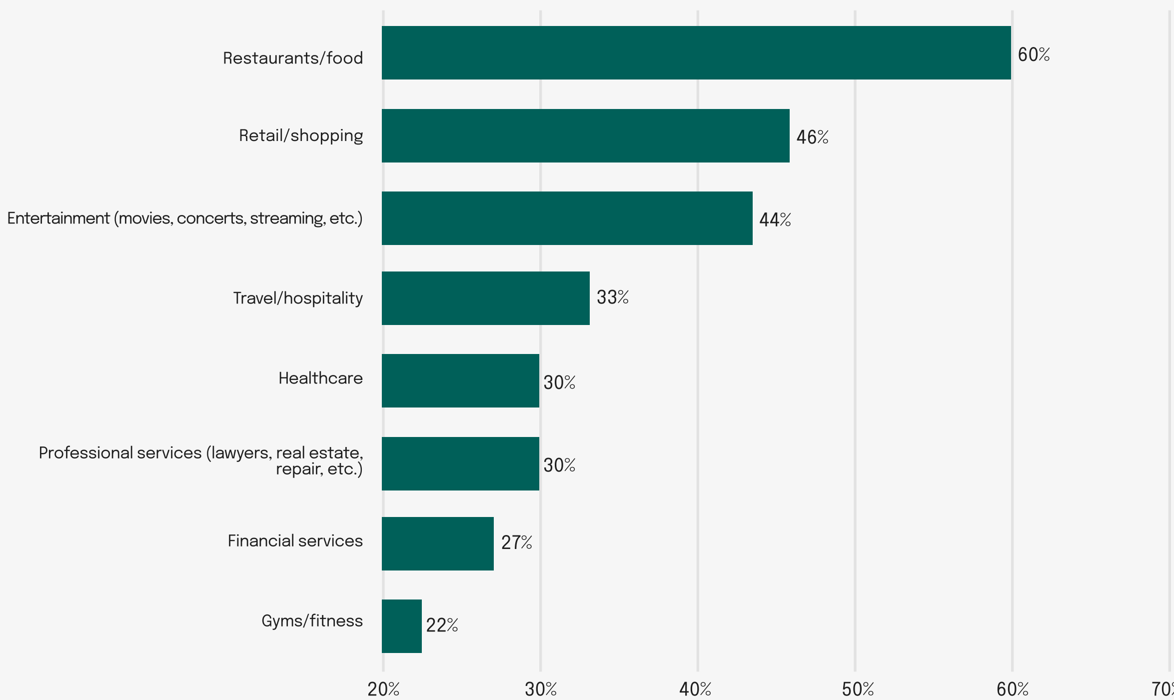

Figure 9: This graph shows the types of businesses people have researched through AI tools. The question was asked only to participants who had previously reported using AI, making this a focused subset of the sample. Because multiple answers per participant are possible, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

This means that when consumers do use AI, they are turning to it for both everyday choices and more significant decisions. **AI is not limited to casual searches. Users are relying on it across industries, from simple dining questions to higher-stakes areas like healthcare and professional services.** The range of use suggests AI is quickly becoming a general advisor rather than a tool reserved for niche or low-risk decisions.

Trust in AI compared with google

When asked to compare trust in AI recommendations against top Google search results, most consumers put them on equal footing. 39% say they trust AI about the same as Google.

More people lean toward AI than away from it. 34% say they are more likely to trust AI, compared with 27% who are less likely. Trust is strongest among adults aged 25-44, while older groups remain far more skeptical.

Trust in AI vs google recommendations by age

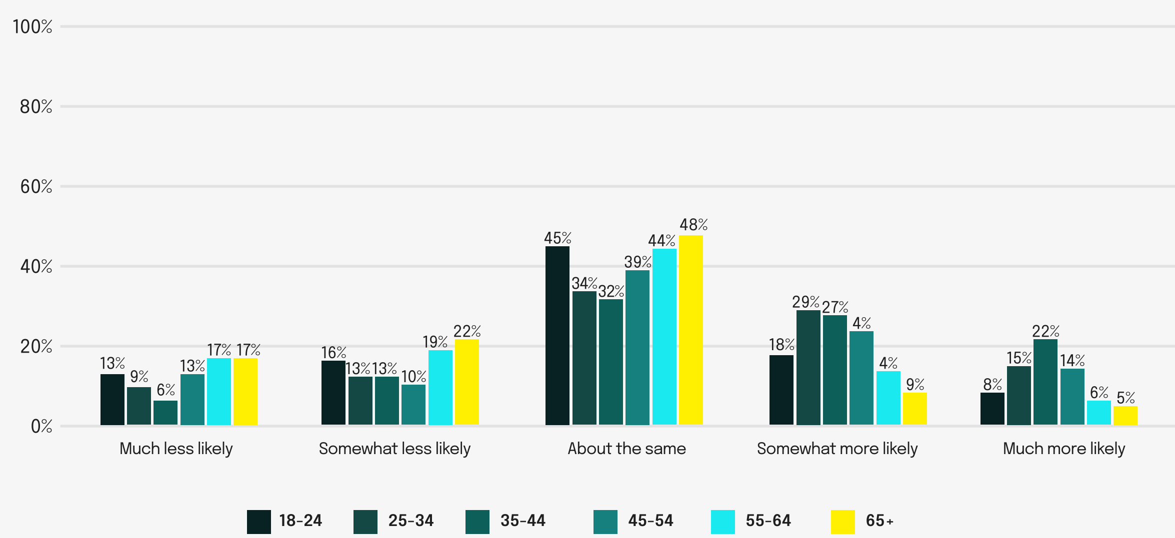

Figure 10: This graph shows trust in AI recommendations as compared to Google search results, segmented by age groups.

This tilt shows AI is already edging ahead of Google for many consumers. **As familiarity grows, AI's influence as a reputation filter is likely to expand even further.**

When a business is missing from AI results

For many consumers, an absence from AI results does not automatically disqualify a business. **41% say it would not affect their decision**. Another 32% would double-check by searching elsewhere, showing that gaps in AI coverage often trigger verification rather than rejection.

Still, missing from AI carries risk. **13% say they would assume the business is less established or relevant, and 8% say they would assume it is less trustworthy.** A smaller share, 6%, say they would not consider the business at all.

Age shapes these reactions. **Younger adults are more likely to see absence as a sign of lower trust, while those 25-44 are more likely to read it as being less established. Older adults are the most relaxed, with more than half of those 55 and older saying it would not affect their decision.**

The takeaway is clear. **While most consumers will cross-check if a business is missing from AI results, a meaningful minority read absence as a warning sign.** As AI becomes a standard filter, visibility in its results will matter more for building trust.

The growing importance of AI reputation

Most consumers already see AI as part of the reputation landscape. **78% say it will be at least somewhat important for businesses to manage their reputation in AI tools in the next few years,** including 28% who say very important and 17% who say extremely important.

Managing reputation in the age of AI

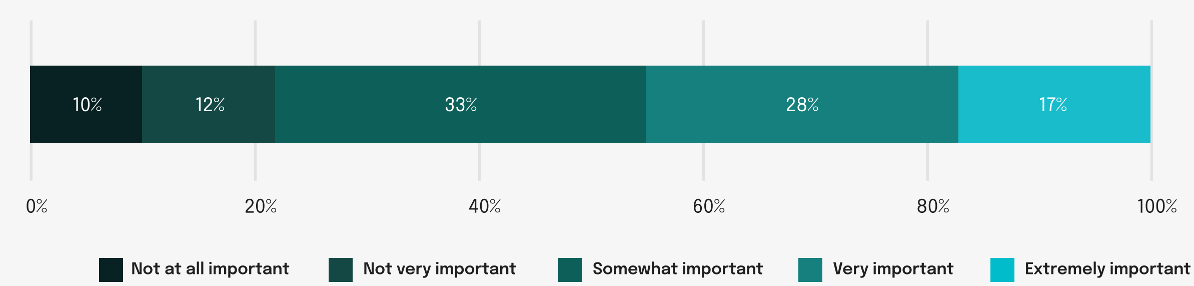

Figure 11: This graph shows how important consumers believe it will be for businesses to manage their reputation in AI-driven tools like ChatGPT and Google AI over the next few years.

Gender splits show a stronger push from men. **Nearly one in four men (23%) say managing AI reputation will be extremely important, compared with only 13% of women**. Women, meanwhile, are more likely to say it is not important.

Perceived Importance of Managing AI Reputation by Gender

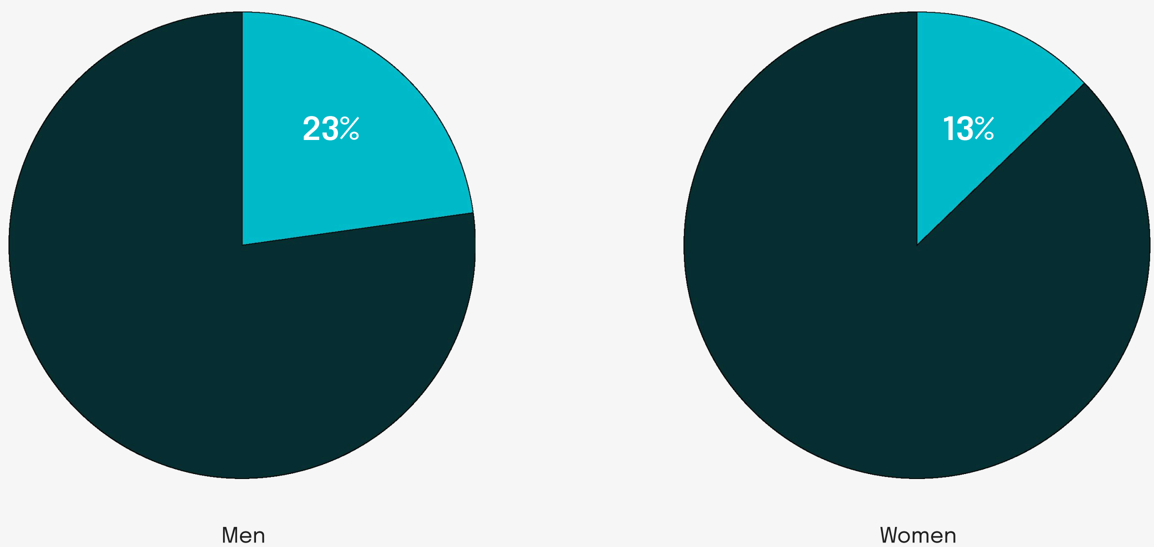

Figure 12: This chart compares how men and women rated the importance of managing AI reputation. Each pie represents responses within its respective gender group.

Age also plays a role. **Adults 25-44 are the most convinced, with more than half rating AI reputation management as very or extremely important.** By contrast, skepticism is higher among older adults, with about 30% of those 55+ saying it is not very or not at all important. Younger adults 18-24 lean toward the middle, with one-third saying somewhat important and one in four saying very important.

Managing AI reputation is not a distant consideration. It is already seen as critical by many consumers, especially younger and middle-aged adults and men. As AI becomes a mainstream filter, businesses that ignore this shift risk falling behind in consumer trust.

Taken together, the findings show that AI has moved rapidly from experiment to essential. Younger, educated, and male consumers are leading adoption, but expectations are spreading across industries. Trust in AI is already rivaling Google, absence from AI results can raise red flags, and nearly eight in ten consumers believe managing AI reputation will be important in the near future. AI is not just another source; it is emerging as the next gatekeeper of consumer trust.

Taken together, the findings show that AI has moved rapidly from experiment to essential. Younger, educated, and male consumers are leading adoption, but expectations are spreading across industries. Trust in AI is already rivaling Google, absence from AI results can raise red flags, and nearly eight in ten consumers believe managing AI reputation will be important in the near future.

> **AI is not just another source; it is emerging as the next gatekeeper of consumer trust.**

The Viral Risk Factor

How viral stories shape trust

Viral moments can quickly reshape consumer opinion. **73% of consumers say a negative story or viral post at least somewhat impacts their trust in a business.** This includes 7% who say it significantly impacts trust and 21% who say it very much impacts trust.

Most people fall into the middle ground. **Nearly half (45%) say viral negativity somewhat affects their trust,** while 19% say the effect is only slight. Just 8% say viral stories do not impact their trust at all.

Few consumers are immune to viral negativity. Even when it does not completely destroy trust, it often plants doubt and makes people reconsider their choices.

What businesses must do to regain trust

Recovery after a negative incident is possible, but consumers expect real action. **The top requirement is proof that the problem has been fixed, named by 61% of consumers.** Nearly half (49%) also want a clear explanation of what happened, and 45% say improvements in customer service are necessary.

Other steps matter but to a lesser degree. Many consumers expect businesses to make amends when reputation issues arise, whether through compensation such as refunds or discounts or by offering a public apology. A small but notable percentage of participants say nothing could win back their trust, underscoring how lasting the damage can be.

Winning back trust after a negative incident

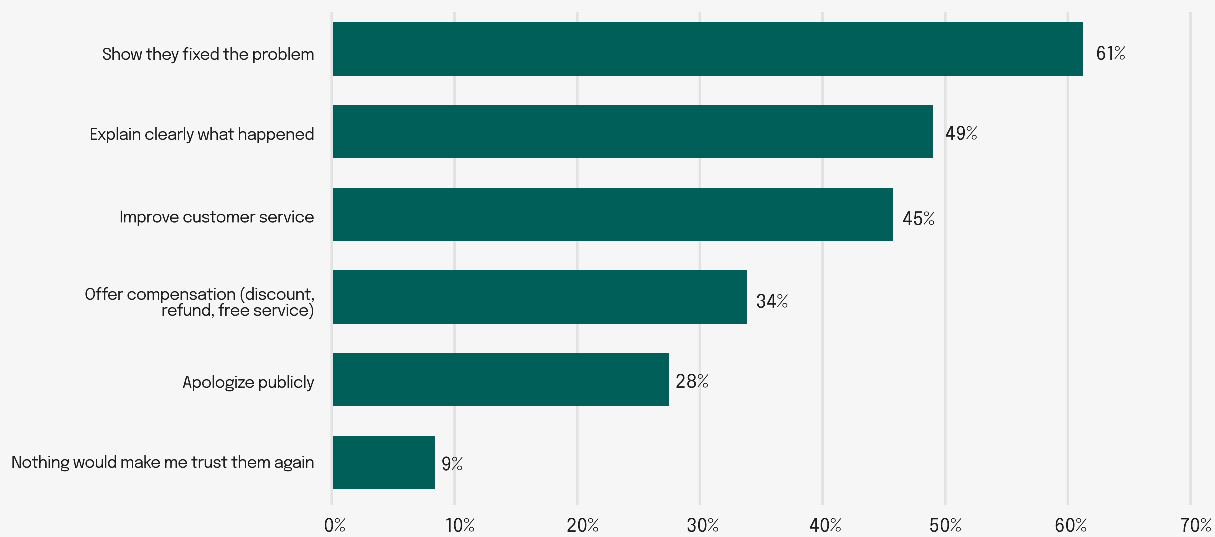

Figure 13: This graph shows what consumers expect businesses to do after a negative incident. Because multiple answers per participant are possible, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

The pattern shows that consumers are less swayed by words alone and more convinced by evidence of change. **Fixing the issue and showing progress outweighs symbolic gestures like apologies.**

In today's AI-driven environment, the stakes are even higher. Viral stories do not just reach people directly, they are also absorbed by AI tools that shape recommendations. **If AI learns from negative content, reputational damage can persist long after the incident, making visible fixes and transparent explanations essential for recovery.**

Online Reputation Strategies for Businesses

Consumers point to three broad areas where businesses must act to protect and strengthen their reputation:

1

Tools and Information

Keep business details current so search engines and AI tools show accurate hours, prices, and availability, something 53% of consumers see as critical.

Monitor AI platforms regularly to catch mistakes and correct them, a step 23% already expect from businesses.

Encourage reviews across multiple sites to boost visibility in searches and AI summaries, with 35% of consumers pointing to reviews as essential.

2

Service and Responsiveness

Respond quickly to customer feedback to show accountability, as 51% of consumers say speed matters most.

Strengthen customer service to prevent problems from escalating, as 47% of consumers say this helps reduce negative reviews and viral complaints.

Stay active on social media, named by 29% as important since issues often surface and spread fast online.

3

Ethics and Transparency

Be transparent when problems occur, with 52% saying openness matters most.

Advertise honestly without exaggeration, supported by 45% who see truth in marketing as key.

Support ethical practices and community values, with 33% pointing to ethics as a foundation of long-term credibility.

Reputation management now means balancing human expectations with algorithmic ones. Businesses that combine strong service, transparent communication, and active monitoring of AI tools will be best positioned to maintain trust in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that reputation is no longer shaped only by reviews or personal recommendations. **AI has entered the mix as a powerful new gatekeeper.** Consumers still rely on Google, Yelp, and social platforms, but adoption of AI is accelerating fastest among younger, educated, and digitally engaged audiences.

Reviews continue to matter, but their limits are clear. Perfectly positive ratings invite doubt, ignored complaints drive people away, and viral stories can damage trust overnight. **In an AI-driven environment, these weaknesses are amplified because algorithms learn from and repeat the content they find.** Recovery depends not only on fixing problems but also on making those fixes visible and verifiable.

The way forward is action. Businesses must combine transparency, customer service, and ethical practices with a disciplined approach to monitoring how AI and other tools present their reputation. **Managing reputation now means shaping both human perception and algorithmic summaries.**

Those who act early will gain a lasting competitive advantage. By establishing trust in AI platforms before they become fully mainstream, these businesses can set the narrative while competitors are still catching up. Those who lag risk losing visibility and trust in a landscape where AI will only grow more central.

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