14 WAYS YOUR BRAND MAY BE COSTING YOU SALES OPPORTUNITIES

How industrial buyers judge your company before they ever call

SCOTT SEROKA

Copyright © 2026 by Scott Seroka. All rights reserved.

Permission to reproduce or transmit in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, must be obtained in writing from the author.

Scott Seroka
Oconomowoc, WI
scott@serokaib.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	01
#1: What Search and AI Say About You	06
#2: Your Website	13
#3: Your Online Presence	20
#4: Your Marketing and Sales Materials	26
#5: Your Proof	33
#6: The First Inquiry Experience	38
#7: Your Salespeople	43
#8: How You Explain What You Do	49
#9: Your Quoting, Proposal and Buying Process	55
#10: Your Facility and the Customer Visit	62
#11: Your Trade Shows and Industry Events	68
#12: Your Presentations and Virtual Meetings	74
#13: How You and Your People Treat Others	80
#14: Your Public and Field Presence	84
Where to Go From Here	89
Numbers Talk	91
Your First-Impression Brand Audit	92
Your 90-Day First-Impression Action Plan	105
Closing Thoughts	107
A Quick Favor	108
Sources and Notes	109
About the Author	111

INTRODUCTION

Brand: The thoughts that come to someone's mind when they hear your name or see your logo, formed by every impression your company has made.

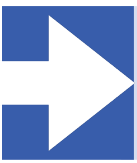
Have you ever formed a first impression of a company that left you with more doubt than confidence in it as a potential supplier or partner?

I have. More times than I can count.

Some examples that immediately come to mind include:

- Websites with more marketing fluff than substance.
- A contact form submission that disappears into a black hole.
- Salespeople who take several days to acknowledge an RFQ.
- Quotes that arrive with vague terms, misspellings and numbers that don't add up.
- Automated phone systems that make it difficult to connect with a human.
- Booth representatives at trade shows scrolling through their phones as attendees walk by.
- Cluttered, neglected visitor lobbies.

All of these can contribute to a poor first impression of a brand, causing some to either second-guess their decision or move on to Option B.



For many industrial purchases, first impressions are made long before a company has any idea a prospective buyer is checking them out.

For instance:

A buyer may search Google or ask ChatGPT to identify reputable suppliers.

An engineer may compare the performance of two pieces of equipment, look for a technical data sheet, search for a replacement component or download a CAD file.

A maintenance manager may investigate a recurring failure and discover a specialty component manufacturer.

A controls engineer may compare automation distributors based on the brands they represent and the technical support they provide.

A purchasing manager may compare supplier profiles on Thomasnet.

An operations executive may review a contractor, service provider or systems integrator on LinkedIn.

A finance or procurement stakeholder may look for evidence that the supplier is stable and credible.

All of that can happen before your phone rings or an email is received.

A 2025 global study by 6sense surveyed nearly 4,000 B2B buyers. In 95 percent of cases, the vendor they chose was already on their list of companies to consider when they began the buying process. Buyers also reported widespread use of AI tools to help with their purchasing decisions. (1)

Gartner reported in 2026 that B2B buyers consulted an average of seven information sources during a recent purchase. Nearly half (45 percent) used generative AI, mainly to research vendors and products. Even with these tools, buyers still wanted people to help confirm their decisions at key points in the process. (2)

While online information may land you on the shortlist, human competence and follow-through will determine if you stay there.

This is why I believe first impressions are more consequential now than ever. Buyers have more ways to research you, your company and your people, and comparing your company against another has never been easier. And it all happens in the background, without your knowledge.

What is a first impression worth?

Consider a company that quotes 200 opportunities a year with an average order of $50,000 and wins one in five. That's $2 million in revenue. Raise the win rate from 20 to 23 percent, and that's six more orders, or **$300,000**, without a single additional lead.

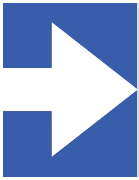
And the real number is likely higher. Some buyers rule you out before they ever request a quote, and you'll never know they were looking.

Keep that in mind as you read. On page 91, you'll run the numbers for your own company.

One poor impression by itself is unlikely to cost you the business

Buyers understand that no company is perfect. But small issues add up: a poor website experience, inconsistent messaging, weak sales materials, low-quality product photography, an unimpressive trade show presence or an unclear answer to "What do you do?"

Together, they can create enough doubt for a buyer to dismiss your company altogether.



Companies that consistently create strong brand impressions throughout the buying process give buyers fewer reasons to question whether they belong on the shortlist.

Industrial buying often involves more than one person.

Everyone who may be involved in the buying process needs to know how your company will meet their needs.

- **Engineering** cares about technical fit.
- **Purchasing** cares about responsiveness, price, terms and supply risk.
- **Operations** cares about capacity, uptime, delivery and support.
- **Quality** cares about documentation and corrective action.
- **Maintenance** cares about serviceability and spare parts.
- **Finance** cares about risk.
- **IT** cares about cybersecurity and integration.
- **Senior leadership** cares about whether your company looks stable enough to become a long-term supplier.

> *LinkedIn and Edelman's 2025 B2B research refers to some of these people as "hidden buyers" — internal stakeholders who may have significant influence even though they have little or no direct interaction with sales. (3)*

In other words, you are not making one first impression. You are making first impressions with multiple decision-makers and influencers who are looking for different signals, such as:

- ☑ An ISO certification and other relevant credentials
- ☑ Case studies and application histories
- ☑ Testimonials and customer references
- ☑ Clear technical documentation
- ☑ Evidence of trained, competent people
- ☑ A clean and organized work, production or warehouse environment

And then there are other signals that deter potential buyers, such as: a salesperson arriving 14 minutes late who never called, a slow website, an outdated product sheet, a vague proposal, a distributor page showing a brand the company no longer represents or a damaged shipment due to careless packaging.

How to get the most out of this book

At the end of this book, you will find a First-Impression Brand Audit. Please do not skip this. Also, consider providing your employees their own copy and asking them to participate.

Then compare the results.

- **Your sales team** will notice different things than your operations team.
- **Your operations team** will notice different things than your marketing team.
- **Your engineers** will notice different things than customer service.
- **An owner** will see the company differently than a newer employee.

An important note: Not *every* impression covered in this book will be a buyer's *first* encounter with your company.

Some will be the first impression made on a new stakeholder, while others will reinforce or challenge impressions already formed.

And now, without further ado…

IMPRESSION #1

WHAT SEARCH AND AI SAY ABOUT YOU

I was sitting in a client's conference room when the vice president of sales asked ChatGPT whether it would recommend his company. The room went silent as everyone read Chat's response on the 72-inch monitor.

To everyone's relief, ChatGPT said it *would* recommend the company. But that wasn't all. It also named several competitors as alternatives and offered to run comparisons.

When the VP of sales asked it to do so, the comparison showed two competitors ahead on capabilities his company actually offered but barely mentioned online.

Within minutes, the leadership team had jotted down a list of priorities that needed to be addressed, and quickly.

The company is now aggressively marketing those capabilities to current customers and buyers, and the inquiries continue to grow.

Revenue from those services, which previously only trickled in, has become a steady stream.

Buyers are getting smarter

Back in the olden days, you know, before 2024, if a buyer wanted to know whether a company could manufacture a particular

component, supply a product, solve a recurring equipment problem or integrate a control system, the path was fairly predictable.

The buyer searched Google, visited a handful of websites, and asked people within their network for recommendations.

Now, as more buyers use AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Grok, they're asking questions like these:

"Which companies make bearings for high-temperature or washdown applications?"

"Which industrial automation distributors in Wisconsin represent major controls brands and provide engineering or startup support?"

"Who manufactures modular conveyor systems for high-mix assembly environments?"

"Which contract manufacturers can fabricate, finish and assemble light-gauge equipment enclosures?"

So try this with *your* company:

Using the AI platforms of your choice, ask questions a buyer might ask when searching for companies like yours.

- ☑ Ask category questions.
- ☑ Ask for companies in your geography.
- ☑ Ask for products with specific operating requirements.
- ☑ Ask for authorized suppliers of a particular brand or technology.
- ☑ Ask for companies with specific capabilities.
- ☑ Ask for comparisons.

Then see what comes back.

Does your company appear in the results? If so, is the description accurate? What other companies does it mention? Does it offer to do a comparison? What else do the results say about you? What recommendations does AI give? If you were a prospective buyer, would you choose your company?

If your company *doesn't* appear, it doesn't mean you have an "AI problem." You likely have a content problem.

Study the companies that *do* appear. In many cases, they will likely have stronger source material:

- More complete product or capability pages
- Better technical documentation
- Clearer application language
- Multiple success stories
- More authoritative third-party mentions
- More consistent information across their digital presence

You cannot control the answer, but you can influence the outcome

Consultants and marketing agencies selling “AI optimization” and “GEO” programs are everywhere. Proceed with caution.

No consultant or agency can guarantee that ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude, Perplexity or any other AI tool will recommend your company whenever someone asks a particular question.

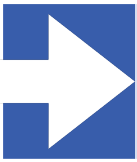
What they *can* do, or what *you* can do, is make your company easy for AI platforms to understand, verify and cite.

If your website says you are a “leading provider of innovative solutions” but fails to clearly explain what you do or sell, how your products perform, which industries you serve, which applications your products or services support, or which certifications you maintain, your brand may struggle to establish credibility with AI or be taken seriously by humans.

The same problem occurs when supplier-directory profiles are incomplete, distributor line cards are stale, LinkedIn descriptions are vague, product data isn’t easy to find, case studies are nonexistent or the only evidence of expertise lives in the head of the owner or the heads of a few employees.

> *Thomasnet shows why buyers need clear information about what suppliers can do. In 2025, Thomas reported 1.4 million registered buyers and more than 1.5 million supplier searches per month across over 78,000 industrial categories. Buyers use supplier profiles to compare capabilities and decide which companies to consider. (4)*

Search and AI give industrial buyers more ways to find, evaluate and compare potential suppliers, making the quality and consistency of your online presence increasingly important.



Your best strategy is to consistently publish relevant content that clearly communicates who you are, what you do, and who you do it for.

Make your company easy to describe

One of the most common weaknesses I see in industrial marketing is the excessive use of vague, overused, chest-thumping, generic language. In other words, meaningless fluff.

For buyers to take your brand seriously, they need to see specifics.

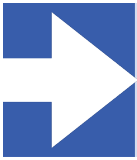
Specific language gives buyers something relevant and meaningful to evaluate. It also gives search engines and AI systems something concrete to interpret.

That being said, you still need strong brand differentiation and a reason to be selected over another qualified supplier.

> *Harvard Business Review's "Tiebreaker Selling" remains useful in situations where several suppliers already meet the fundamental specifications and price expectations. In those cases, buyers may need a justifiable reason to choose one finalist over another. (5)*

But differentiation without clarity is useless.

"We care" is **not** a differentiator.
"Family owned since 1964" is **not** a differentiator.
"Quality, service and value" is **not** a differentiator.



Telling buyers exactly what you do well, for whom, under what conditions, and why it matters *is* a differentiator.

Write for people first

You may be tempted to stuff pages with repetitive keywords and awkward AI-friendly prose to help get discovered. That's going off the deep end, and most buyers will find it annoying.

The best content for AI discovery is usually the same content buyers value:

- ☑ Clear explanations
- ☑ Useful technical information
- ☑ Answers to real questions
- ☑ Examples of your work
- ☑ Evidence that supports your claims
- ☑ Current facts

In my professional opinion, this will *always* be the best type of content to publish.

Watch for errors, omissions, and inconsistencies

AI-assisted research can reveal brand inconsistencies.

AI can surface information and draw conclusions that many buyers take seriously. For example, if the list of industries you serve on your website doesn't match the list on your company's LinkedIn profile, AI may point out the discrepancy and even flag it as a potential concern.

Or, if a manufacturer lists your company as an authorized distributor but your website doesn't mention that product line, what is the buyer supposed to conclude?

If an old product name still appears on a directory page, is that product still supported? If one source describes you as a systems integrator and another as a component reseller, which role is accurate?

Conduct an identity and information audit

Because AI can bring discrepancies to light, conduct an annual identity and information audit to keep everything current and clean.

Start here:

- ☑ Company name and any DBAs
- ☑ Address and phone numbers
- ☑ Website URL
- ☑ Leadership names and titles
- ☑ Founding year
- ☑ Employee information
- ☑ Industries served and applications supported
- ☑ Certifications and authorizations
- ☑ Core products, capabilities and services
- ☑ Manufacturers represented, where applicable
- ☑ Logos and brand marks

Your quarterly visibility check

Repeat the exercise on page 7 every quarter, and note four things:

1. Whether your company appears
2. How it is described
3. Which sources are being relied upon
4. Which competitors appear beside you

You may discover that your flagship product isn't visible online or that third-party sources still describe your company based on industries or customer segments that no longer represent the majority of your business.

You may find that buyers can see which products you sell but not why they should buy them from you.

You may discover competitors with stronger brand positioning.

Check Your First Impression

- ☑ When a buyer asks AI or search engines for companies, products, services or expertise in our category, is our company easy to understand?
- ☑ Are our products, capabilities, applications and services described specifically enough for someone outside our company to know where we fit?
- ☑ Are our basic company facts, product information and market descriptions consistent throughout our digital presence?
- ☑ Do we publish enough content for buyers and AI systems summarizing us to distinguish us from competitors?
- ☑ Do we use the words and terminology buyers are likely to use when describing their needs, applications and problems?

Buy the book to continue reading