How AI is changing the B2B buying process

Wednesday, November 18, 2026 06:00 AM EDT
By Deborah Daily, Co-founder & President, Buckaroo Marketing | New Media

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A prospect recently told us how they found Buckaroo.

They didn't begin by asking colleagues for referrals or working through pages of Google results. Instead, they asked an AI tool to identify the top three marketing companies in their area that met several criteria: a five-star Google rating, a physical business address, contact information, and demonstrated expertise in manufacturing, industrial and related B2B markets.

Buckaroo was one of the companies returned.

That says a lot about how the buying process is changing.

This is not a debate about whether AI is good or bad, whether every company needs an AI strategy, or where the technology leads. The more immediate issue for B2B companies is simpler: buyers can now gather, filter, compare and interpret information differently than they did a few years ago.

And much of that can happen before your sales team knows a buying process has started.

Consider your own organization.

A purchasing manager might use AI to identify suppliers that manufacture a particular component or brand, serve a specific industry, hold certain certifications, and have the resources to support the application.

An engineer may use it to understand available technologies before deciding which suppliers deserve a closer look. An operations leader could compare approaches to a production problem. An executive may use it to research potential vendors before agreeing to a meeting.

This extends beyond manufacturing. Companies searching for an accounting firm, marketing partner, logistics provider, software platform, commercial contractor, engineering resource or other B2B partner can use AI similarly.

The point is not that AI will make the decision. It is that buyers can get much further into the decision-making process on their own.

We are already becoming accustomed to this as consumers. AI-assisted tools can organize information, summarize differences, and narrow the field without requiring us to examine every option.

Industrial buyers can do the same.

A buyer could ask which valve manufacturers offer products suitable for a particular media and pressure range, serve food and beverage processors, provide sanitary options, and demonstrate experience with similar applications.

Or a prospect could compare automation suppliers based on capabilities, industries served, technical support, geographic coverage, and relevant experience.

That creates a different starting point for the sales conversation.

It also raises an important question for CEOs:

If your own people are beginning to use AI to research and evaluate suppliers, what makes you think your customers aren't doing the same thing to you?

That is where this becomes more than a technology discussion.

When buyers relied primarily on search engines, companies worried about appearing in results and getting someone to visit the website. Those things still matter. But now the information available about your company may also help a buyer understand what you do, compare alternatives, assess your credibility and decide whether you belong on the shortlist.

The prospect who found Buckaroo was not simply looking for "a marketing agency." The search included reputation, location, accessibility and relevant B2B expertise.

Your prospects can be just as specific.

That means the quality and clarity of your marketing footprint matter differently.

Can someone quickly determine the markets you serve? Are your capabilities clearly explained? Is your expertise visible? Do your case studies demonstrate the problems you solve? Is your contact information easy to find?

AI does not eliminate the need for strong salespeople. But it may change what prospects expect when they finally engage one.

A buyer who has already researched the technology, reviewed suppliers, compared solutions, and developed specific questions may enter the conversation far better informed. The salesperson is no longer necessarily starting at the beginning.

For B2B companies, that makes what happens before the first conversation increasingly important. It also makes an outside-in assessment more valuable.

Inside an organization, people see the company through the benefit of everything they already know. They understand the capabilities, expertise and reasons customers choose them. It is easy to assume those strengths are equally apparent outside.

They may not be.

An outside-in assessment asks: What can someone actually learn? What is clear? What is missing? Does what the market sees accurately reflect the organization behind it? Is it clear how your company is differentiated from the competition?

AI adds another layer to that assessment, but the underlying business issue has not changed.

Whether a prospective customer is using Google, visiting your website, talking with colleagues, or asking an AI tool to identify and compare potential suppliers, your company is being evaluated before you have the opportunity to explain yourself.

When customers start looking, what will they find?

If you're not sure your marketing footprint clearly communicates your expertise, differentiation and reasons to choose you—or how your company may appear when buyers use AI to research potential suppliers—a conversation with Buckaroo can provide an outside-in perspective.

Next in the series: The Different Ways Companies Actually Grow

Deborah Daily is the co-founder and president of Buckaroo Marketing | New Media, a Fishers-based strategic multimedia, marketing, communications, and advertising agency established in 1999. She can be reached at DLDaily@gobuckaroo.com. To learn more, visit www.gobuckaroo.com.



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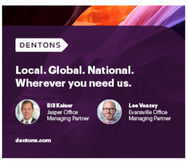

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