

Competitive Authority Report 2026

FOUNDING BRIEF

How complex organizations become easier to
understand, trust, and choose

First Edition, September 2026



A Note from the Founder



Many years ago, I was a young Chief Technology Officer at a growing government-contractor firm. I joined a colleague in business development and an executive from a teaming partner to meet informally with a federal program manager. We were there to explain what our organizations could do together to help this agency.

I prepared the way I knew how. I led with our technical skills, enterprise application-integration capabilities, buzzwords and diagrams that I believed made our work clear and would impress him. The program manager listened politely. When the meeting ended, I felt that I had made a strong case.

Then the executive from our teaming partner offered a lesson that changed the way I think about being chosen. I had explained our capabilities, he said, but not enough about the agency's mission, the outcome the program manager needed, or why our experience made us a credible partner in achieving it. Technical strength mattered. It simply was not sufficient on its own.

That realization stayed with me. It shaped my transition from technology leader to founder and CEO, and from an IT consulting company to a marketing and advertising agency. It also helped me see a recurring challenge: capable organizations can do important work and still be difficult for evaluators to understand, trust, and move forward.

At Identika, we use the Competitive Authority Framework, or CAF, to organize some of that work. This report is not an introduction to the framework. It is our first research-led examination of the conditions shaping competitive authority in the United States in 2026.

We are publishing this Founding Brief to connect current evidence with practical questions for leaders. Each year, we will revisit what has changed. Between annual editions, we will publish shorter Authority Signals when a material development merits attention.

I hope this report helps you examine what a buyer, partner, evaluator, or stakeholder can understand about your organization before a conversation begins. Use it as a field guide. Ask what is clear, what is distinctive, what can be verified, and what may be keeping your best work from receiving the attention it deserves.

I welcome your feedback.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "F. Beltran".

Fernando Beltran

Founder and CEO, Identika

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The 2026 Executive Brief

The big picture: Competitive authority is the degree to which an organization is understandable, credible, and easy to advance when an evaluator is forming an opinion. It is not the same as brand awareness, follower count, or a polished identity.

This Founding Brief identifies four research-led conditions shaping competitive authority in the United States during 2026. A fifth government-market context is included separately because it concerns public policy status, not a general market trend.

Finding	What the evidence indicates	The practical implication
1. Confidence and consensus	Complex B2B decisions move through non-linear tasks and multiple stakeholders. Digital and human interactions both matter. [1][2]	Make the organization easy to understand, verify, and explain to others.
2. Visibility and evidence	Google's guidance for its AI Search features continues to prioritize original, useful content and a clear technical foundation over special AI-search tactics. [3][4]	Build helpful evidence paths, not generic content volume.
3. Systems over surfaces	In the structured public-category review, all five signals were present in every one of the 15 large organizations examined.	Treat a complete authority system as the baseline an evaluator expects, not a differentiator.
4. Activity versus value	Recent global executive research finds faster movement in AI adoption and reported productivity than in broadly reported revenue or enterprise-level financial impact. [5][6]	Apply the same proof discipline to AI and innovation claims that evaluators expect from every other material claim.

What this report is: A concise, evidence-led field guide for leaders of high-consideration B2B and government-contractor organizations.

What this report is not: A market-size study, a vendor ranking, a procurement guide, a legal or compliance opinion, an investment recommendation, or a CAF training manual.

The Question Behind the Report

Before a meeting, proposal, or recommendation, what can an evaluator reliably understand about your organization from the evidence already in front of them?

In complex decisions, an organization is often evaluated before it is heard directly. A stakeholder may be looking for a credible summary, a relevant point of view, proof that can be shared internally, or a route to the right next question. Gartner describes B2B buying as non-linear and shaped by both digital and human interactions. [1] Edelman and LinkedIn similarly describe hidden buyers as active participants in discovering and evaluating thought leadership. [2]

This report uses five diagnostic signals to make that question practical.

Diagnostic signal	Reader question
Clarity	Can an evaluator understand the organization's relevant value and context without decoding jargon?
Distinctiveness	Is there a specific, defensible point of view or reason to remember the organization?
Proof	Can a stakeholder find evidence that is credible, current, and appropriately scoped?
Visibility	Is relevant expertise and proof easy to find through ordinary public paths?
Consistency	Do capability, leadership, proof, and experience reinforce one another?

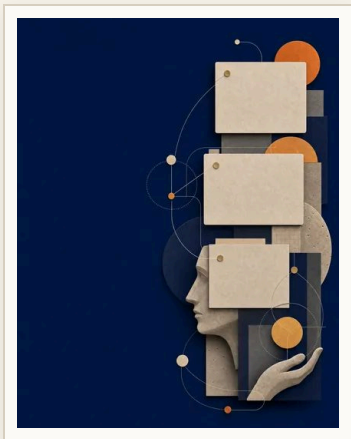
Reader guardrail: Strong authority does not eliminate due diligence. It makes a responsible evaluation easier to begin.

Finding 1: Complex Buying Is a Confidence and Consensus Problem

LENS: THE EVALUATOR’S GAZE

Why it matters: In high-consideration B2B decisions, a buyer is rarely completing one linear journey. Gartner describes recurring buying tasks that can include problem identification, solution exploration, requirements building, supplier selection, validation, and consensus creation. [1]

The implication is straightforward. A strong capability statement is necessary, but it may not answer the questions that help an evaluator reduce uncertainty or explain a recommendation to colleagues.



Evaluator need	Weak signal	Stronger signal
Context	A broad statement of what the organization does.	A clear account of the mission, commercial, or operating problem it is equipped to address.
Relevance	A long capability list.	A direct explanation of how the organization’s experience applies to the evaluator’s situation.
Confidence	A claim of expertise without support.	Evidence that can be understood, verified, and shared with peers.
Next step	A generic contact invitation.	A useful resource, question, or route for the next stage of evaluation.

Evidence note: These are communication-design implications drawn from the cited B2B research. They are not a claim that every buying group follows the same sequence. [1][2]

What an Evaluator Is Trying to Take Back to the Room

LENS: THE EVALUATOR'S GAZE

A useful authority signal does not stop at making an organization look capable. It helps a stakeholder answer four internal questions.

Internal question	What public materials should make available
What problem does this organization understand?	Specific audience, mission, operating, or market context.
Why should we believe it can help?	Relevant examples, methods, responsible expertise, and clearly scoped outcomes.
What makes it a credible option?	A recognizable point of view and evidence that is more specific than category language.
How do we move forward safely?	A clear next step that supports learning, not pressure.

In practice: KD Panels U.S.

Identika built the KD Panels U.S. commercial-interiors system around three research-informed audience journeys, three messaging pillars, and two conversion-resource paths. The point is not to replicate the same asset mix. It is to give each audience a relevant way to understand the offer, examine the proof, and take the next step. [10]

Reader Tool: The Evaluator Brief Test

Purpose: Test whether an evaluator can explain your value without attending an internal briefing.

Ask a colleague outside the immediate team to review one priority public path. Give them five minutes. Then ask for a plain-language answer to these questions.

Test question	Pass condition
What problem does the organization solve?	The answer is accurate and concrete.
For whom does it matter most?	The audience is specific enough to be useful.
What evidence supports the claim?	At least one relevant, credible proof source is visible.
What makes the organization distinct?	The answer goes beyond a generic category statement.
What should an interested evaluator do next?	There is a sensible, low-friction next step.

Bounded next action: Repair the single answer that was unclear. Do not redesign every page. One missing answer often reveals the first signal worth improving.

Finding 2: The Visibility Gap Is Moving From Content Volume to Evidence Access

LENS: THE VISIBILITY GAP

Google’s published guidance for AI Overviews and AI Mode states that the same foundational Search practices remain relevant. It emphasizes helpful, reliable, people-first content; a clear technical structure; accessible and findable text; and high-quality supporting media where appropriate. It also states that there are no special requirements or special optimizations for inclusion in these features. [3][4]

The key issue is not whether every organization can optimize for a new acronym. It is whether the organization’s most useful expertise is original, accessible, technically available, and easy for people to explore.

Visibility question	Evidence-led response
Is the information original?	Add first-hand experience, methods, or informed interpretation rather than restating generic advice. [3]
Is it useful?	Answer a consequential audience question in an organized, readable form. [3]
Can systems access it?	Maintain crawlable pages, textual access to important content, internal links, and sound technical basics. [3][4]
Can a person use it?	Design a page experience that makes main content, proof, and next steps discernible. [3][4]

Guardrail: Good technical practice does not guarantee indexing, prominence, traffic, or conversion. Google states that eligibility and best practices do not guarantee crawling, indexing, or serving. [3][4]

Visibility Is a Path, Not a Post

LENS: THE VISIBILITY GAP

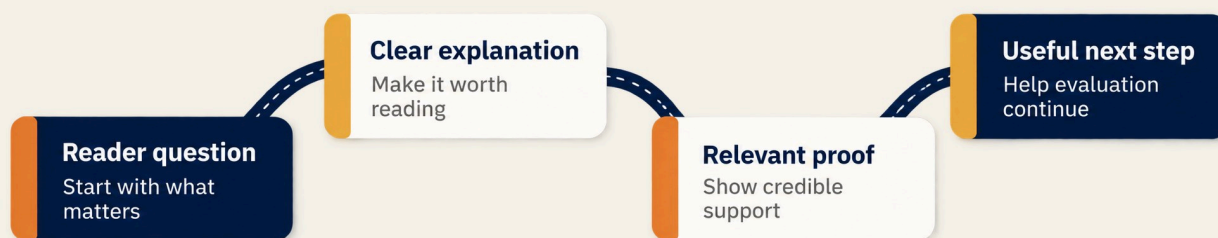
A buyer, partner, or evaluator should not need to assemble an organization's story from disconnected fragments. A productive evidence path connects a relevant question to a clear explanation, appropriate proof, and a useful next step.

Question » explanation » proof » next step

In practice: Fairfax CORE SEO & Digital Performance

For Fairfax CORE, Identika combined technical SEO, content structure, user-experience improvements, and reusable editorial tools to make a public entrepreneur resource hub easier to discover and use. The project recorded more than 20 percent growth in organic-search sessions, movement of core service keywords from page 3 or lower to pages 1 and 2, and more than 40 identified technical SEO and Core Web Vitals issues. Those results belong to that engagement. The relevant lesson is how technical, content, and experience improvements can work together to make useful evidence easier to find. [11]

EVIDENCE PATH



A four-part evidence path: a reader question leads to a clear explanation, then to relevant proof, then to an appropriate next step.

Reader Tool: The Evidence Path Scan

Choose one question that a high-value evaluator asks before reaching out. Then follow your own public path as if you had never met the organization.

Step	Reader check
1. Find	Can you reach a relevant explanation through a normal search, site navigation, or shared link?
2. Understand	Does the page answer the question in plain language before asking the reader to act?
3. Verify	Is there a supporting proof source that is current and appropriately scoped?
4. Continue	Is the next step useful for the reader's stage of evaluation?

Bounded next action: Improve one broken handoff. Examples include a service page with no proof, a case page with no context, an insight with no route to relevance, or an inaccessible document that holds the only useful evidence.

Finding 3: Authority Is Built Through Connected Evidence Systems, Not Surface Branding

LENS: AUTHORITY VS. BRANDING

A visual identity can increase recognition. It cannot, by itself, establish that an organization understands a consequential problem, has relevant experience, or can support a stakeholder's next decision.

This Founding Brief uses five diagnostic signals, Clarity, Distinctiveness, Proof, Visibility, and Consistency, to organize a practical examination of public evidence without ranking individual organizations.

A connected authority system links a clear capability description with a distinct point of view, credible proof, public pathways, and an experience that holds together. A gap in any one element can make a capable organization harder to advance.

The implication is practical. Treat a complete authority system as the baseline an evaluator expects, then identify the one missing or disconnected signal that makes the next decision harder.

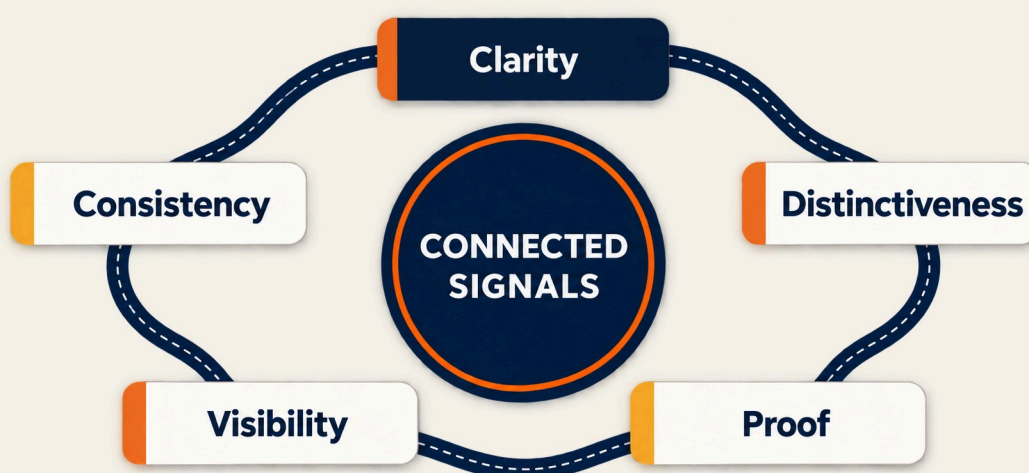
Scope note: This framework is a decision-support lens. It does not measure commercial performance, market share, search rank, traffic, technical quality, procurement status, or audience preference.

Signal system	A useful public question
Capability	What does the organization actually help a specific audience accomplish?
Point of view	What perspective, method, or expertise makes its interpretation useful?
Proof	Where can a stakeholder examine relevant experience or outcomes?
Visibility	How does a reader find the relevant material without knowing the site in advance?
Consistency	Do the public touchpoints make the same promise in compatible language?

KEY POINT

At the top of a high-consideration category, a complete authority system is the baseline, not the differentiator.

FIVE SIGNAL SYSTEM



Five connected authority signals: Clarity, Distinctiveness, Proof, Visibility, and Consistency.

Clarity Must Be Designed for the Audience That Needs to Act

LENS: AUTHORITY VS. BRANDING

Authority signals become more useful when they reflect evidence about the people who need to understand them. That includes how an audience discovers information, what channels it trusts, and what barriers may prevent access to useful material.

In practice: Your Fairfax, Your Future

For Fairfax County's Adult and Aging Division, Identika conducted a five-week research effort that included 23 focus-group participants across three sessions and an accessible survey offered in eight languages. The work connected audience insight, trusted communication channels, accessible formats, and a coherent awareness platform. [12]

The research design was shaped by a specific public-service audience and context. The broader lesson is that clarity should be informed by real audience evidence rather than assumptions about what people need or prefer.

Reader Tool: The Signal Connection Map

Map one priority offer across the five diagnostic signals. The purpose is not to create more content. It is to identify where an evaluator encounters a disconnect.

Signal	The asset or evidence you have	The gap to examine
Clarity	A clear audience-and-problem statement.	Is the explanation filled with internal language or undefined terms?
Distinctiveness	A specific point of view or method.	Could a direct competitor say exactly the same thing?
Proof	A case, result, subject-matter expert, method, or third-party source.	Is the proof current, relevant, and appropriately qualified?
Visibility	An owned page, insight, resource, or public expert presence.	Can an evaluator find it by following a normal path?
Consistency	Connected service, proof, leadership, and next-step materials.	Do the signals reinforce or contradict each other?

Bounded next action: Choose one missing or disconnected signal. Assign one owner, one evidence source, and one review date. Authority compounds through disciplined maintenance, not a one-time campaign.

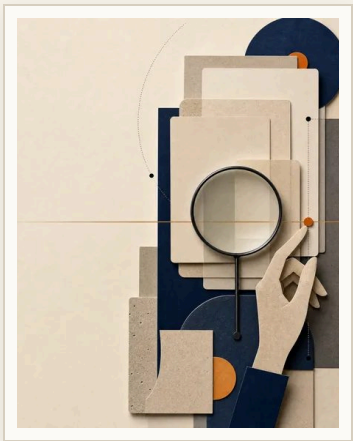
Finding 4: In 2026, Visible AI Activity Is Not the Same as Demonstrated Value

LENS: THE SHORTLIST SIEVE

AI has become a visible part of the competitive landscape. But visible adoption, a public announcement, or a broad innovation claim is not the same as a credible account of value.

Two recent global executive research programs point in the same direction while using different samples and measures. PwC reported that 56 percent of surveyed CEOs had not yet seen significant financial benefit from AI. [5] Deloitte reported that 20 percent of surveyed organizations had achieved revenue increases from AI, while 74 percent hoped to do so in the future. [6]

The defensible takeaway is modest but important. Across these two global research programs, interest, adoption, and reported productivity gains are moving faster than widely reported revenue or enterprise-level financial outcomes.



A claim that can create skepticism	A more credible authority signal
"We are AI-powered."	A defined use case, the context it addresses, the responsible owner, and an appropriate proof source.
"AI transformed our business."	A clearly scoped change, relevant evidence, and the limits of what the evidence establishes.
"Our AI is better."	A specific, substantiated capability or method without unsupported comparative language.
"We move faster with AI."	A measured operational, service, or user benefit with a documented timeframe and source.

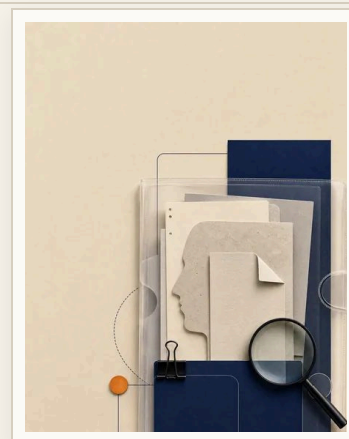
Scope note: These survey findings are global, not a measure of U.S. high-consideration B2B buyers. They do not predict outcomes for a reader’s organization. [5][6]

The Shortlist Is a Proof Environment

LENS: THE SHORTLIST SIEVE

When evaluators compare options, generic claims tend to converge. The differentiator is often the quality of the evidence surrounding those claims.

The question is not whether every statement needs a metric. It is whether a material statement can withstand a reasonable request for context, source, method, scope, and date.



Proof question	Why it matters
What exactly happened?	Vague outcomes make it difficult to assess relevance.
For whom and in what context?	A valid result may not apply to a different audience or environment.
When was it measured?	Currentness changes the usefulness of an otherwise credible claim.
How was it measured?	A credible source and method protect against accidental overstatement.
What does it not prove?	A limitation statement makes the claim more responsible, not less useful.

Practical implication: Treat the claims that matter most as assets with owners, sources, and review dates. A well-maintained proof library can shorten the distance between interest and informed evaluation.

Reader Tool: The Claim-to-Proof Register

Start with five material public claims. For each one, identify the evidence needed to preserve the claim or the reason to qualify it.

Use the first row as a model, then complete the remaining rows for your own claims.

Claim	Source and date	Scope and method	Owner	Publish, qualify, or remove?
"Our platform reduced onboarding time."	Client program record, March 2026	One client, one workflow, measured over 90 days	Program lead	Qualify: state the client type, the workflow, and the measurement window

Bounded next action: Withdraw or qualify one claim that does not have a usable evidence record. It is better to reduce a claim responsibly than to leave an evaluator to discover the gap.

The Competitive Visibility Architect

LENS: THE COMPETITIVE VISIBILITY ARCHITECT

The most durable authority systems do not rely on a single campaign, spokesperson, social post, or brand launch. They connect evidence, expertise, audience questions, useful public assets, and measurement into an operating practice.

This is where the report's five narrative lenses meet. The Evaluator's Gaze identifies the questions that must be answered. The Visibility Gap identifies whether the answers can be found. Authority vs. Branding separates recognition from credibility. The Shortlist Sieve tests whether the claims can survive comparison. The Competitive Visibility Architect turns the system into an owned practice.

Operating component	Minimum standard
Audience questions	Identify the consequential questions different evaluators must answer.
Message architecture	Explain the relevant problem, value, and distinction in language the audience can use.
Proof system	Maintain source-backed examples, methods, expertise, and outcome claims with limitations.
Public pathways	Connect questions to useful pages, insights, resources, and clear next steps.
Measurement and review	Recheck claims, evidence, accessibility, technical health, and audience usefulness on a defined cadence.

Interpretation: This is Identika's applied synthesis of the report's evidence and diagnostic signals. It is not a new empirical finding or a claim that one system guarantees a commercial outcome.

COMPETITIVE VISIBILITY OPERATING MODEL



A five-component operating model: audience questions inform message architecture; message architecture is supported by a proof system and public pathways; measurement and review maintain all components.

A 30-Day Authority Maintenance Cycle

LENS: THE COMPETITIVE VISIBILITY ARCHITECT

Use a short cycle to move from observation to one defensible improvement.

Week	Focus	Deliverable
Week 1	Choose one priority audience question.	A plain-language evaluation brief.
Week 2	Trace the public evidence path.	A list of gaps across Clarity, Distinctiveness, Proof, Visibility, and Consistency.
Week 3	Fix one consequential gap.	A revised proof asset, explanation, pathway, or accessibility issue.
Week 4	Test and record.	Feedback from one independent evaluator and an updated claim-to-proof record.

Bounded next action: Select the next 30-day cycle now. Do not begin with a channel. Begin with an evaluator question that matters to a real decision.

30-DAY AUTHORITY MAINTENANCE CYCLE



A four-week maintenance cycle: evaluation brief, evidence-gap list, one improvement, then feedback and record.

U.S. Government-Market Context: Status Is Part of Credibility

LENS: THE SHORTLIST SIEVE

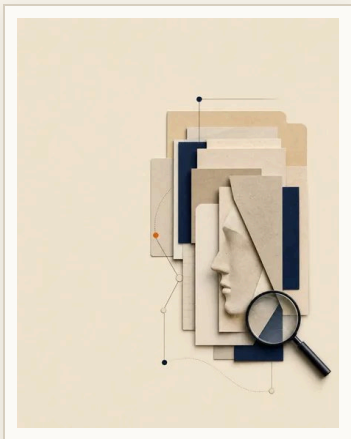
For government-contractor organizations, public statements sometimes involve regulatory, procurement, or eligibility context. The first authority signal is simple: distinguish what is final from what is proposed.

Item	Status as of September 29, 2026	What the source says	Reader guardrail
Federal Acquisition Regulation threshold rule	Final rule. Published August 27, 2025; effective October 1, 2025.	The rule adjusted acquisition-related thresholds. [7]	This is factual context only. It is not procurement, legal, compliance, or eligibility advice.
SBA small-business size standards	Proposed rule. Published August 20, 2026; comment period extended to close November 20, 2026.	The SBA proposed new size standards for 338 industry groups and industries. A notice published September 24, 2026 extended the comment period by 60 days. [8]	A proposal is not a final rule. Do not treat it as effective or use it to assess any organization's status or eligibility.

Practical implication: A policy statement should include its source, date, status, and scope. If the statement is material to a decision, route it to a qualified reviewer before publication or use.

Method, Scope, and CAF Disclosure

This is the inaugural edition of an annual report series. It combines direct-source review, a structured public-category review, and selected Identika case examples to identify practical signals rather than rank companies.



Evidence layer	What it included	What it does not establish
Direct-source review	Official platform guidance, public policy sources, and method-disclosed B2B or executive research.	Universal buyer behavior, performance guarantees, or a complete census of the market.
Public-category review	A structured review of approved public communications. Observations were recorded at the organization level.	A ranking, benchmark, market-share analysis, search-traffic measurement, commercial-performance analysis, or population-level inference.
Case examples	Three selected Identika projects that make a practical lesson concrete. [10][11][12]	A prediction that another organization will produce the same result or that a project proves an industry-wide conclusion.

The Competitive Authority Framework, or CAF, is Identika’s organizing lens for the five diagnostic signals used in this report. It is disclosed here to make the perspective transparent. The report does not teach the framework, sell it as a product, or treat it as a substitute for the evidence cited in each section.

Research date: August 2026. Policy statuses in this report are stated as of the research date and are subject to change.

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identika.com/insights/competitive-authority-founding-brief

Turn Your Existing Strength Into a Growth Opportunity

Many organizations already have credible expertise, relevant experience, and evidence worth sharing. The growth opportunity is to make those strengths visible in a form that the right evaluator can understand, verify, and confidently carry into the next conversation.

Choose one consequential audience question. Build a single path from a clear answer to a relevant proof point and a useful next step. Improve it, observe how it is used, and repeat. The aim is not to add promotional noise. It is to create a more legible experience of the value your organization can bring to a meaningful decision.

Picture the next evaluator arriving with a real question and leaving with the context, proof, and confidence to invite your organization into the conversation.
Competitive authority turns existing capability into a more visible opportunity for informed consideration.

Continue the Opportunity	Purpose and Reader Return Path
Build on This Brief	Visit the Founding Brief landing page at identika.com/insights/competitive-authority-founding-brief to return to the report context, follow future Authority Signals, and carry one priority question into your next review.
Assess Your Own Signals	Take the Competitive Visibility Scorecard at scorecard.identika.com to see which of the five signals your organization already carries and where an evaluator would have to do the work.
Explore the Broader Point of View	Explore Identika Insights at identika.com/insights .
Discuss a Specific Opportunity	Schedule a consultation at tidycal.com/identika/15-minutes .

Closing control: The Founding Brief landing page is the primary reader return path. Insights is a secondary editorial destination. Consultation is optional and reserved for readers with a defined higher-intent opportunity. No other report page contains a conversion call to action.

Sources

[1]: Gartner, [B2B Buying: How Top CSOs and CMOs Optimize the Journey](#). Accessed August 2026.

[2]: Edelman and LinkedIn, [2025 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report](#). Accessed August 2026.

[3]: Google Search Central, [Optimizing Your Website for Generative AI Features on Google Search](#). Accessed August 2026.

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[6]: Deloitte, [The State of AI in the Enterprise](#). Accessed August 2026.

[7]: Federal Acquisition Regulation, [Inflation Adjustment of Acquisition-Related Thresholds](#). Accessed August 2026.

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