

AI Search Visibility: Why Authority Is the New Ranking Signal for B2B Tech

A CEN Whitepaper

Prepared By

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Executive Summary

For more than two decades, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) defined digital visibility for B2B technology companies. The goal was straightforward: rank on Google, drive traffic, and measure clicks. Generative AI has made that model insufficient.

Today, B2B technology customers increasingly turn to AI systems, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Perplexity, Microsoft Copilot, and Google AI Overviews, with questions that once went to search engines: Which vendor should I evaluate? What platform is best for my use case? Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is now the discipline that determines whether a company appears in those answers, or doesn't.

To understand GEO, it is helpful to see it in the context of SEO, which dominated discovery over the past few decades. Search engines find and rank content using SEO principles. AI systems evaluate content to understand, validate, synthesize, and recommend. This is a fundamentally different process than search ranking, driven by different signals. The companies most likely to appear in AI-generated recommendations are not necessarily the largest, the longest-established, or those with the best SEO. They are the ones whose credibility, category position, and expertise are consistently and repeatedly confirmed across trusted external sources.

This white paper explains how AI systems generate recommendations, which signals matter most, and what B2B technology companies can do to improve their position before the window of competitive advantage closes.

Section 1: From Search to Synthesis: Digital Visibility Now

At first glance, GEO appears to be a natural evolution of SEO. Both are concerned with visibility, involve strategy with the presentation and positioning of content, and influence how buyers discover companies. Each addresses a fundamentally different function, however; and companies that confuse them pay for it.

SEO helps search engines find, index, rank, and display content. GEO provides AI systems with the structure to synthesize and recommend information. Before going further, there are three terms worth defining, because they are often used interchangeably but have slightly different meanings

Large Language Models (LLMs) are the underlying engine of AI search. LLMs are trained on large volumes of text and learn to generate language by predicting patterns. OpenAI's models, Google's Gemini, and Claude are all LLMs.

Generative AI is the broader category of AI tools that produce content in response to prompts. When buyers use ChatGPT or Perplexity to research a vendor, they are using generative AI.

GEO is the strategic discipline of shaping how a company is understood, represented, and recommended within AI systems.

TWO DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES		
Dimension	Search Engine Optimization	Generative Engine Optimization
Goal	Rank in search results	Appear in AI recommendations
Optimizes for	Crawlability, keywords, links	Authority, consistency, third-party validation
Primary signals	Backlinks, page structure, content freshness	Earned media, analyst coverage, reviews, comparison content
Outcome	Buyer finds you via search	AI recommends you by name
Does not guarantee	AI visibility or recommendation outcomes	Search rankings or direct traffic volume
A company can rank well in search and be largely invisible to AI — the signals that drive each are different.		

GEO and the Tale of Two AI Cybersecurity Companies

The following example illustrates how GEO plays out for two cybersecurity companies offering Data Loss Prevention (DLP) tools with AI features. SteadfastSecure has 15 years in the market, a strong customer base, a polished website, and good SEO rankings. By traditional digital marketing metrics, the company has good presence. SecureAI is a newcomer with five years in the market, fewer customers, and lower SEO rankings. From an SEO standpoint, SteadfastSecure is stronger. However, when potential customers query an AI system with “Which DLP platform is best?”

SecureAI appears in more answers than SteadfastSecure. The reason is that SecureAI has stronger signals to AI systems, which results in the company being positioned as more authoritative. To understand SecureAI’s ranking, we should look at the activity the company pursued in the 18 months prior to its strong AI positioning. In that period, SecureAI undertook strategic engagement with third-party sources and ensured that all company descriptions and core messages were consistent across all platforms.

SecureAI’s CEO was quoted three times in tier-one technology and business press on emerging threats to corporate data. The company was named as a leader in a Forrester Wave report, which was publicized by both the company and the analyst firm. Also, key members of its executive team contributed op-ed bylines to security industry media. In the same period, SecureAI received more than 40 verified reviews on G2, earning a High Performer badge in the Data Loss Prevention category, and completed a SOC 2 Type II certification. The company was also featured in four independently published “Best DLP Tools” and “DLP Alternatives” roundups, each naming it alongside three to five competitors with a brief differentiation summary.

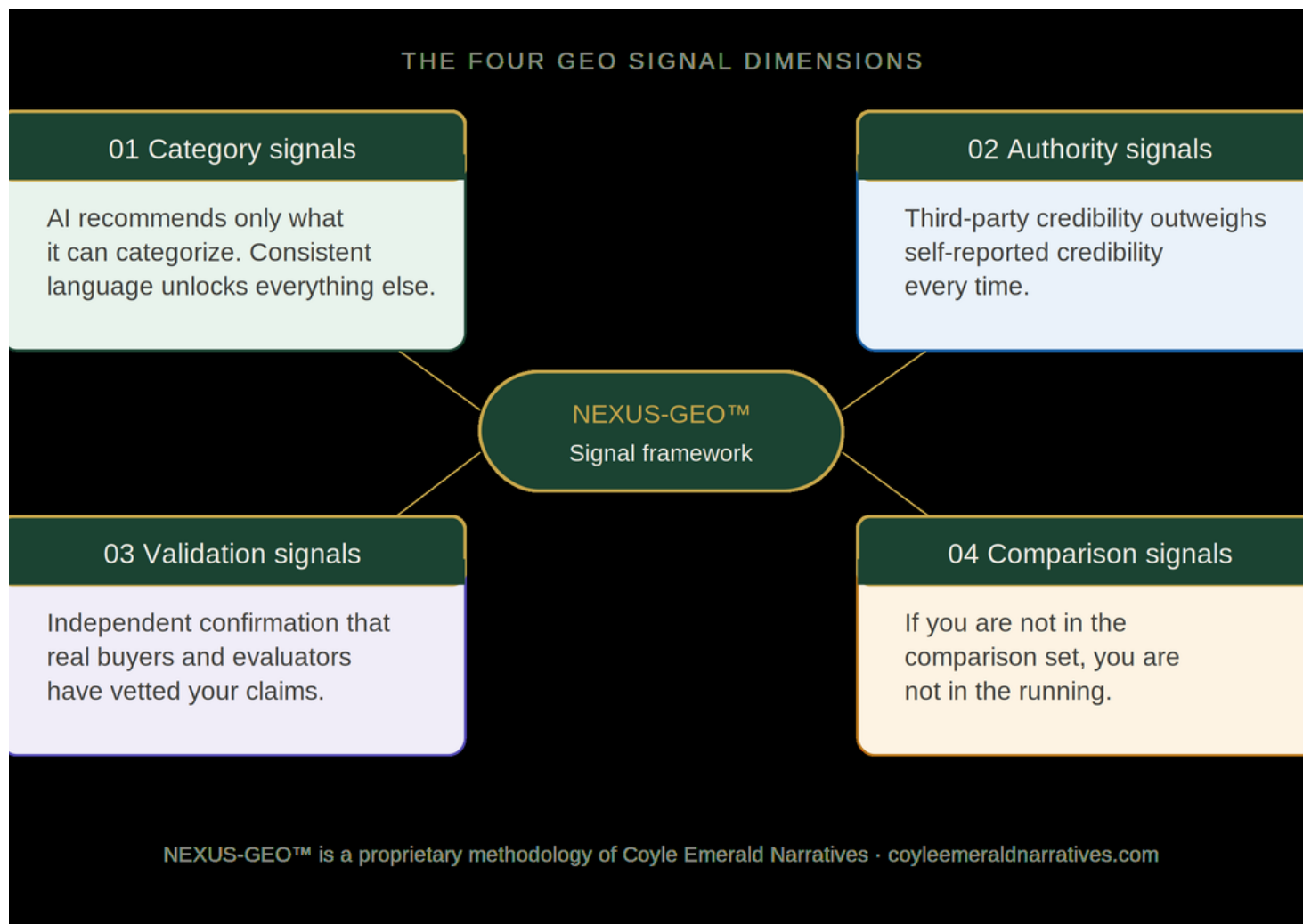
SteadfastSecure, in contrast, had less activity with third parties in the same period. The company’s main media presence was inclusion in two articles that listed industry DLP players, without any executive quotations. The company did not appear in any analyst reports, nor did its executive team contribute to the security media. On its website, SteadfastSecure was described on its homepage and key product pages as a DLP pioneer. However, the company website also has pages focused on SteadfastSecure’s cloud-first offerings as well as its AI product additions. These pages boosted the company’s ranking for cloud-first and AI in SEO, but they confused AI search, which then had less confidence in SteadfastSecure. The company had six G2 reviews, none posted within the past two years, and no current third-party certifications listed on its review profile. It appeared in one comparison roundup, listed without commentary alongside a dozen other legacy vendors.

The root cause of SteadfastSecure's GEO gap is signal inconsistency, which is a fixable problem with a clear methodology. More importantly, SteadfastSecure’s position is not an isolated case. The same gap is playing out across every B2B technology category right now, and the companies that close the gap first will own the conversation.

Signal activity	SteadfastSecure 15 yrs - strong SEO	SecureAI 5 yrs - lower SEO
Earned media <i>Press mentions</i>	2 list articles, no quotes	CEO quoted 3x in tier-one tech press
Analyst coverage <i>Gartner, Forrester, IDC</i>	No analyst reports	Named leader in Forrester Wave
Thought leadership <i>Exec bylines & op-eds</i>	No executive bylines	Exec team published in security media
Message consistency <i>Across all platforms</i>	Varied: DLP pioneer vs cloud-first vs AI product	Consistent descriptions across all channels
Validation <i>Reviews & certifications</i>	6 G2 reviews, none recent no certifications	40+ G2 reviews - High Performer badge - SOC 2 certified
Comparison <i>Buyer-guide presence</i>	1 roundup, no commentary	4 roundups naming differentiation
AI recommendation <i>outcome</i>	Rarely appears in AI-generated shortlists	Consistently recommended despite smaller market presence

Section 2: The Signals AI Systems Trust

AI systems look to signals to establish relevance, authority, credibility, and confidence for their recommendations. CEN's NEXUS-GEO™ framework groups these into four signal dimensions:



Let's look at each signal in more detail:

Category signals: AI understands what a company does through its category signals. Category signals also provide insight into a company's competitive fit in the market and the problems it solves. Examples include the language used to describe a company and its products, clear problem/solution content on its website, and structured content that mirrors AI queries.

Authority signals: Authority signals let AI systems determine if a company is recognized by valid third parties as having expertise. Examples of authority signals include:

- **Earned media placements** in credible technology and business publications are strong signals for LLM training data because they represent validation at scale.
- **Bylines and op-ed articles** help to establish authority by having the LLMs associate the executives with thought leadership and trends.
- **Analyst mentions** (Gartner, Forrester, IDC) carry outsized weight because LLMs view the analysts as having a high level of industry credibility.

Authority signals don't happen by accident. They're the cumulative result of coordinated media, analyst, and thought leadership activity over time. The companies that build these signals contribute original perspective to industry dialogue rather than restating consensus. In analyst relationships, especially, openness pays, and vendors who engage candidly with their own positioning earn more substantive, specific coverage. This level of specificity is exactly what AI systems use to establish credibility.

Validation signals: Validation signals provide independent confirmation that the market is responding to the company's products or services. These signals give AI systems confidence when recommending a company, and examples include industry awards and recognition; customer reviews on platforms like G2, Gartner Peer Insights, and TrustRadius; certifications; and structured third-party assessments. Unlike earned media, many validation signals carry structured data, such as star ratings, category rankings, or verified buyer status. AI systems can parse these validation points with high confidence. A company that has never been independently evaluated simply does not have these signals, and that absence is visible to AI.

Comparison signals: Comparison signals determine which companies AI puts on the shortlist and which it leaves off entirely. When buyers ask AI to evaluate options, identify alternatives, or rank platforms by use case, AI draws on buyer guides, competitive comparisons, alternatives pages, and ranking content to construct its answer. That content becomes the evaluation set for comparison signals. Presence here is binary. Companies that appear consistently in comparison environments get recommended. Companies that don't appear, regardless of how strong their product, brand, or individual content assets may be, won't register a strong comparison signal.

Why authority is now the primary differentiator

AI systems do not simply retrieve information. They evaluate confidence. And confidence is built through the same signals that have always built reputation: credible third parties saying, independently and repeatedly, that this company knows what it is talking about.

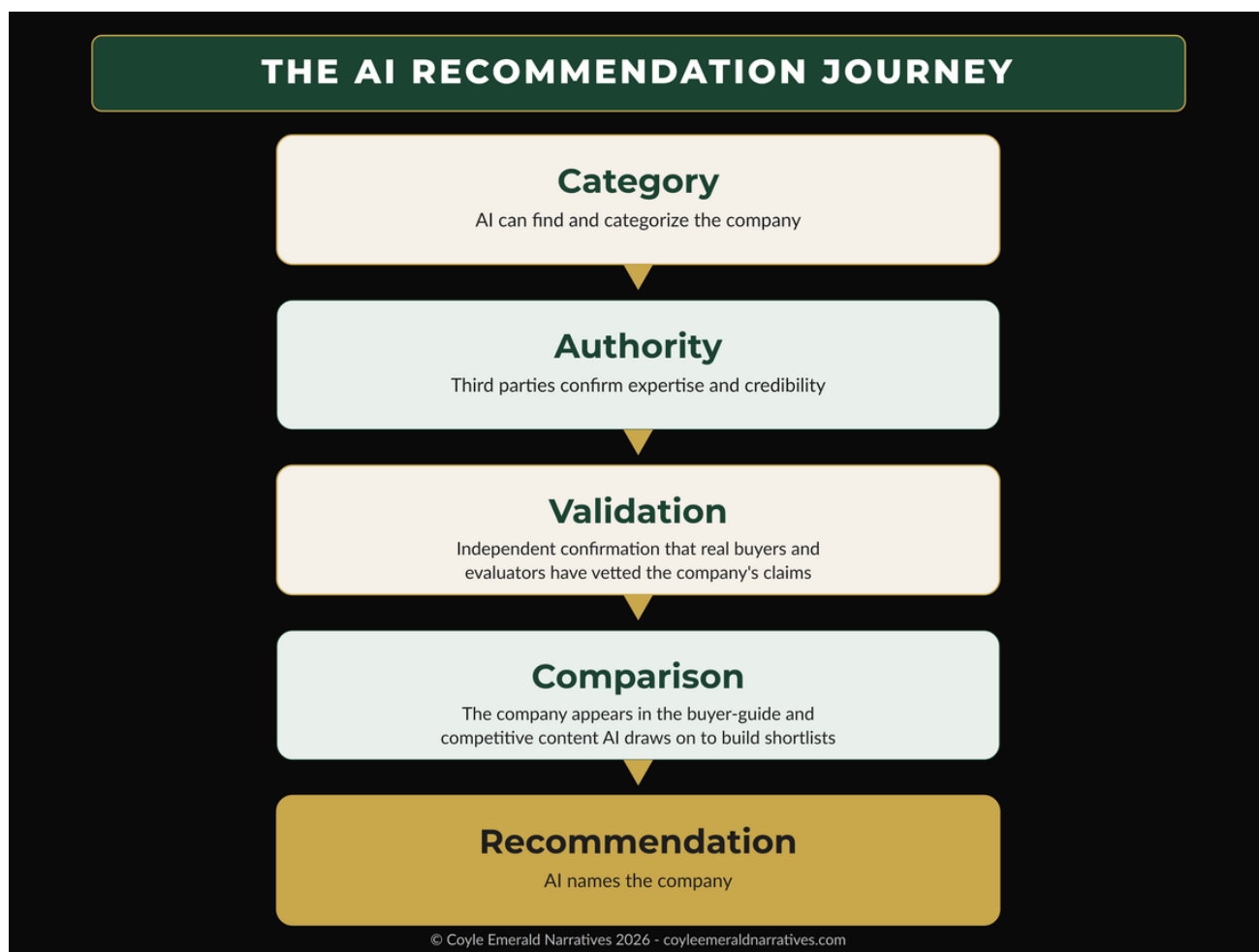
The companies most likely to appear in AI-generated answers are those supported by strong category signals, broad external visibility, independent validation, and consistent authority reinforcement, across all four signal dimensions.

Category determines whether a company can be found. Authority determines whether a company can be recommended. This progression, the AI Recommendation Journey, is how NEXUS-GEO™ traces a company's path through the four signal dimensions to an AI-generated recommendation.

Section 3: Building Your GEO Signal Foundation

Understanding the signal categories is the starting point. The strategic question for any company is where to focus first. The same four signals move in a sequence, from AI first finding and categorizing a company, to establishing authority, to accumulating independent validation, to appearing in the comparisons buyers actually see, and finally to the recommendation itself.

Not every signal carries equal weight, and not every company starts from the same position. A company with strong earned media but weak comparison content has a different problem than one with strong validation signals but inconsistent category language. GEO strategy begins with an honest assessment of a company's gaps.



Start with category signals: they unlock everything else.

Authority, validation, and comparison signals only work if the AI system already understands what a company does. A Forrester mention means more when the category language around it is consistent.

A G2 review is more powerful when the product description on the review platform matches the product description on the company website.

Before investing in external signal building, audit the basics: how is the company described on its own website, in press coverage, in analyst mentions, and in third-party listings? The more variation in that language, the more foundational work needs to happen first.

Build authority signals through coordinated external programs.

Strong earned media, executive thought leadership, and analyst engagement don't happen by accident.

They require planned, sustainable programs. A typical program will include outreach to credible earned media, developing executive points of view, and engaging analyst firms with the openness and preparation that results in meaningful coverage.

This is one area where quality means more than quantity. A single placement in a tier-one publication carries more GEO weight than dozens of syndicated press release pickups.

Activate validation signals systematically.

Customer reviews, awards, and third-party assessments are among the most underutilized GEO assets in the B2B technology industry. Many companies have satisfied customers who would leave a G2 review if requested, but no one asks. An awards calendar, a structured review request process, and proactive engagement with certification programs are all within reach for most companies.

Build comparison presence deliberately.

If a company does not appear in comparison content, such as buyer guides or competitive roundups, it will be less likely to appear in AI-generated shortlists. This is one of the most actionable GEO gaps to close.

The window is open, but not indefinitely.

GEO is not yet a standard discipline. Most B2B technology companies are not managing their AI signal ecosystem deliberately. That creates a genuine window of competitive advantage for companies that move now. The companies that establish strong category signals, build credible authority, accumulate validation, and appear consistently in comparison environments will be the ones AI recommends to the buyers who are already asking.

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About Coyle Emerald Narratives

Coyle Emerald Narratives (CEN) is a B2B technology communications consultancy specializing in Generative Engine Optimization and Public Relations. CEN works with technology companies to build and strengthen the external signal ecosystems that shape how AI systems understand, position, and recommend their business.

CEN's proprietary NEXUS-GEO™ framework provides a structured approach for assessing and improving AI visibility across the signal dimensions covered in this paper, evaluating how AI systems currently represent a company and identifying the specific gaps most likely to affect recommendation outcomes.

If your company is ready to understand where it stands in the AI visibility landscape, and what to do about it, contact Anne Coyle at anne.coyle@coyleemeraldnarratives.com

The observations in this paper reflect AI system behaviors as of June 2026, a rapidly evolving landscape. The SteadfastSecure and SecureAI examples are based on real companies; names have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

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