



CLOUDWAYS
by DigitalOcean

From Search Rankings to AI Recommendations

A Strategic Guide to Closing the Operational Divide
Between Visibility and Performance

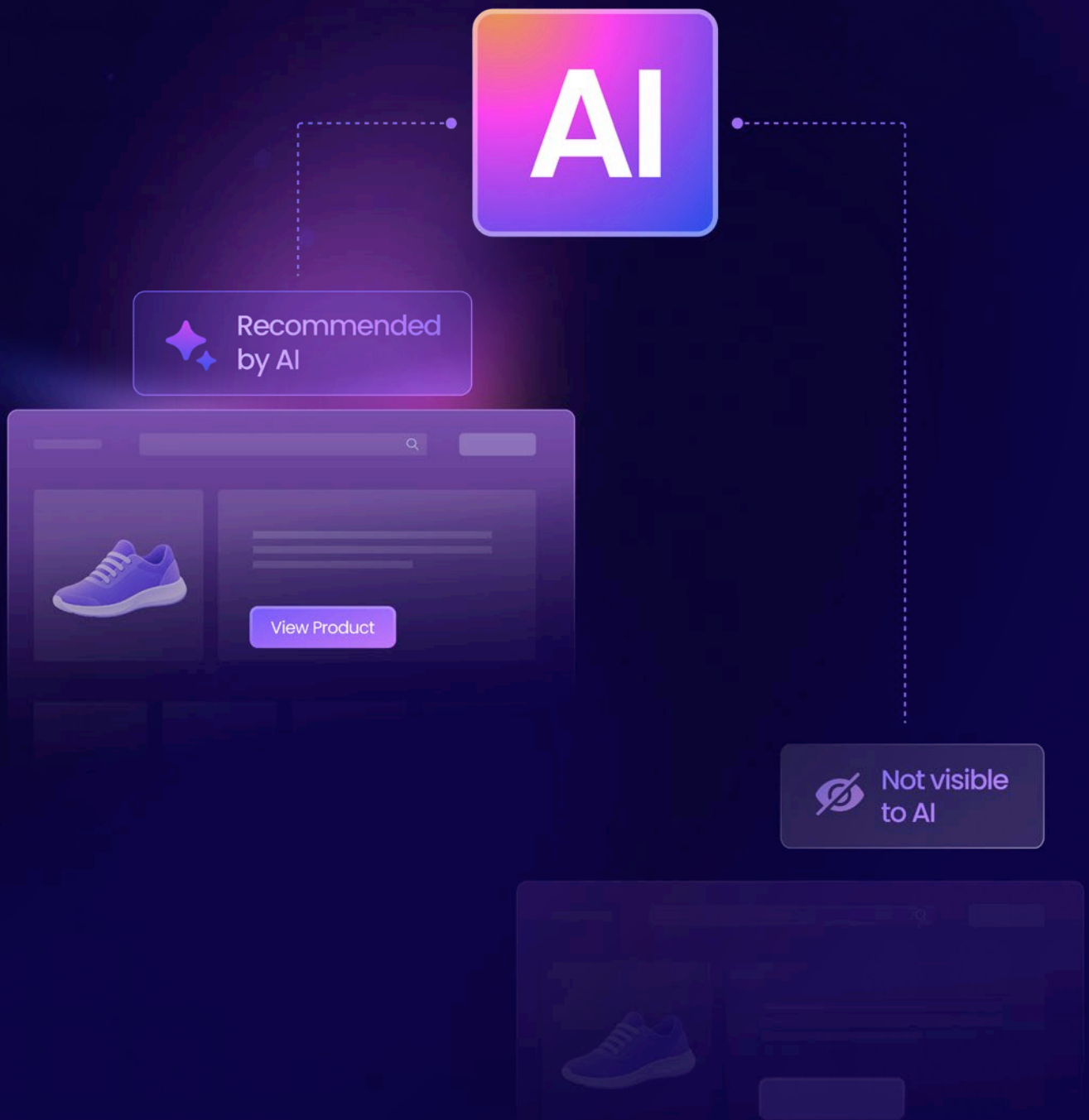


Table of Contents

1. Introduction	03
2. The new rules of being found	06
3. Performance is now a commercial issue	10
4. Preparing for less predictable demand	12
5. The AI confidence gap	13
6. Closing the AI Visibility Gap	15
7. Be seen, be ready	17
8. Methodology	17

Introduction

The fight for visibility is no longer just about ranking first. It is about being chosen by AI.

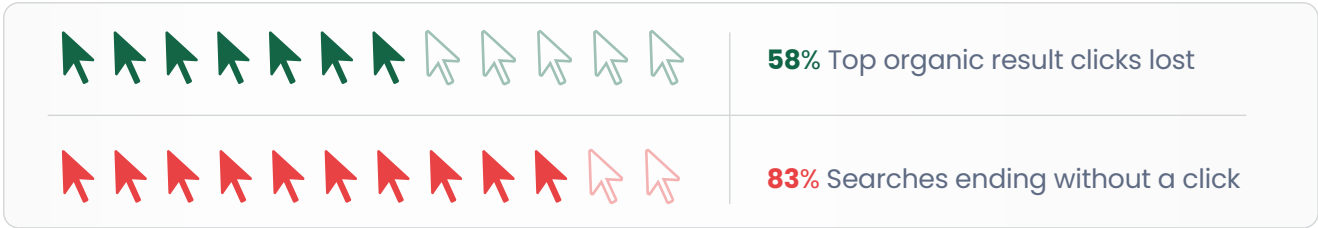
For decades, brands built their digital strategies around a predictable exchange: appear near the top of a search page and customers would click through. Businesses invested heavily in content, keywords and SEO to win that moment.

But that model is starting to break down.

Buyers are increasingly asking AI tools what to buy, where to go and which companies to trust. More than a third (37%)¹ of consumers say they now start their searches in an AI tool, while referral traffic increased 796%² between 2024 and 2025.



AI is also reshaping traditional search. Google’s Gemini-powered AI Overviews now appear on roughly 30%³ of searches. And when they do, the top organic result loses about 58%⁴ of its clicks, while the proportion of searches that end without a click rises to around 83%.



Sources

¹<https://eighttwo.com/blog/2026-ai-search-behavior-study-ai-now-first-stop-for-search/>

²<https://www.webfx.com/blog/seo/gen-ai-search-trends/>

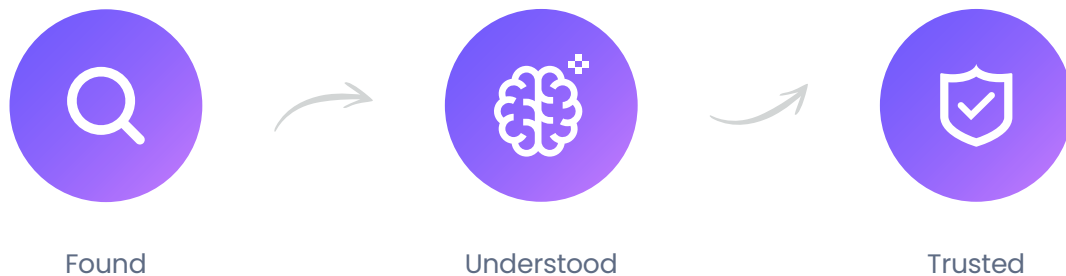
³<https://www.demandsage.com/ai-overviews-statistics/>

⁴<https://ahrefs.com/blog/ai-overviews-reduce-clicks-update/>



A brand can therefore rank highly, publish strong content and still be missing from the answer that shapes a customer's decision.

This is the new visibility challenge. Before a business can win a click, it must first be found, understood, and trusted by the systems that generate the answer.



Far from making the traditional website obsolete, generative AI is making it more important than ever.

AI systems need credible, accessible and trustworthy information from which to build their responses. But they can only use that information if the infrastructure behind it is fast, secure, reliable and consistently available. In the AI era, hosting is no longer just about keeping websites online. It is becoming part of how brands are discovered, evaluated and recommended.

Visibility in the AI era depends on more than appearing in an answer. It requires businesses to be ready when attention arrives:

-  discoverable by AI,
-  credible enough to be recommended and
-  technically capable of converting interest into action.

This is creating a new commercial divide: **the AI Visibility Gap**.

On one side are businesses building the content, infrastructure and operational capability required for AI-led discovery and commerce. On the other are organizations still relying on yesterday's approaches to search and website performance.

Cloudways' inaugural **AI Visibility Gap Report** establishes a new annual benchmark for this divide. Drawing on research among 1,000 digital and e-commerce business decision-makers across the UK and US, it examines how organizations are responding to changing discovery behaviors, less predictable digital demand and rising expectations of website performance.

The findings show that businesses increasingly recognize the connection between technical performance and visibility. Four in five (80%) believe technical website performance now plays a greater role in online visibility than content alone.

They also reveal the commercial consequences of failing to build that foundation. One hour of website downtime costs the average digital business an estimated \$56.7k. That is approximately \$945 for every minute, or \$15.75 for every second, a website remains unavailable.



This report explores where businesses are making progress, where confidence is running ahead of capability and what organizations must do to close the AI Visibility Gap and remain visible, resilient and competitive as AI becomes more influential across the customer journey.

The new rules of being found

Traditionally, discovery was a race to earn the click. Today, it is a race to become part of the answer.

Businesses are already feeling the effects of that shift. 82% believe that AI-powered recommendations are changing how customers discover their brand. Meanwhile, 76% say “AI Overviews” have already reduced their website traffic during the past 12 months. The impact is escalating faster in some markets too. For example, in the UK, 80% of businesses report traffic losses from AI Overviews. This is eight percentage points higher than their US counterparts, where 72% reported the same.



30%

Three in ten (30%) believe AI assistants and recommendation engines will have the biggest impact on visibility over the next two years.

The reason is simple. A business can still rank highly in traditional search yet never appear when a customer asks an AI assistant for a recommendation. Visibility is no longer determined by search rankings alone. It is shaped by the signals AI systems use to understand, evaluate and recommend a business.

A brand's website sits at the center of a wider digital footprint that includes media coverage, customer reviews, structured data, citations and trusted third-party references. Together, these signals help AI systems understand what a business does, assess its credibility and determine whether it should be recommended.

But those signals are only valuable if they can be accessed. Slow websites, poor availability and unreliable hosting weaken the digital evidence AI relies upon. Hosting is no longer simply the platform that keeps a website online. It has become part of how brands establish credibility before a customer ever visits their site.



Business leaders increasingly recognize this shift. Over three quarters (77%) now believe traditional SEO tactics alone aren't enough to obtain visibility. This means that content quality and technical performance must reinforce one another.



77%

say traditional SEO alone is no longer enough.



Visibility increasingly starts before a customer reaches the website. The role of the site is to provide the evidence AI systems need to recognize what the business does, who it serves and why it should be trusted.

Suhaib Zaheer,
GM Cloudways and Senior VP Managed Hosting at DigitalOcean.

Case study

CoolSafety's experience shows why AI visibility will depend on more than content alone. Its previous hosting setup struggled with slow load times, inconsistent performance and periods of poor availability, weakening the digital foundation behind the brand.

After moving to Cloudways, CoolSafety achieved a 99 Google PageSpeed score, met Core Web Vitals and maintained zero downtime during high-demand periods.

The result was a faster, more dependable website that strengthened user experience and supported search visibility, making the business easier for both customers and automated systems to trust.



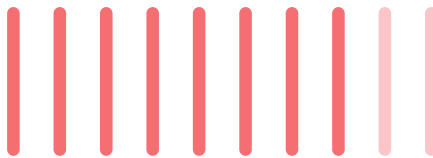
[Read More](#)

AI assistants have now become the way customers discover brands, and a brand's own website is only one of the facets for LLM discovery. 80% of the UK and US decision-makers (UK: 78%, US: 81%) believe customers will increasingly interact with those brands through AI assistants without visiting the websites directly. 82% (UK: 83%, US: 82%) agree that AI-powered search and recommendation systems are changing how customers discover brands at all.



82%

agree that AI-powered search and recommendations are changing how customers discover brands.



80%

of the UK and US decision-makers believe customers will increasingly interact with brands through AI assistants.

77% of respondents in both the UK and the US agree that traditional SEO alone is no longer enough to guarantee visibility. Brands need to be visible on other sites as well, including third-party reviews, media coverage and comparison sites, all of which can influence the information AI assistants present to customers.



CLOUDWAYS
by DigitalOcean



It presents as a mere fact these days that a brand cannot solely rely on its website alone. In the LLM responses we've analysed, third-party sites regularly appear alongside a brand's own website, meaning they require almost the same scale of visibility on those sites too. Which only means that it has become increasingly important that what they say is accurate as well.

Ramsha Zaib,
AI SEO Strategist

Performance is now a commercial issue

Once AI has recommended a business, performance determines whether that recommendation turns into revenue.

Every recommendation eventually depends on a customer reaching a website, loading a page, completing a purchase or submitting an enquiry. When that experience fails, the commercial value of visibility is lost.

Our research found that just one hour of downtime costs the average digital business an estimated \$56.7k. That is roughly \$945 per minute, or \$15.75 every second a site remains unavailable. Across a year, the estimated cost rises to \$453.4k during peak trading periods.

While speed, uptime and reliability have traditionally been treated as technical concerns, they now directly influence customer acquisition, conversion, reputation and revenue. Businesses are responding accordingly, with 81% having made improving website speed, uptime and reliability a greater priority over the past 12 months. This focus is particularly pronounced in the UK, where 84% businesses state these improvements as a priority; five percentage points higher than the US (79% stating the same).



Improving website **speed, uptime** and **reliability** is a greater priority for businesses.

84%

of UK businesses

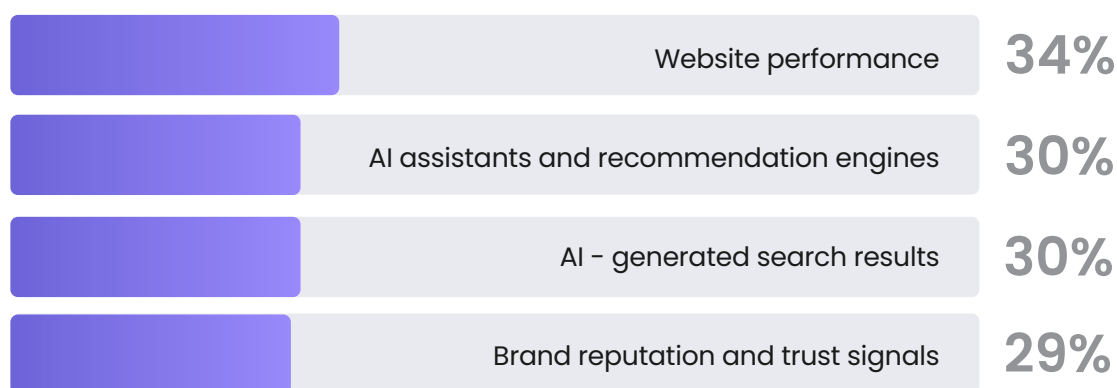
79%

of US businesses

That priority is also shaping how businesses think about future visibility.

When asked which factors will have the greatest impact on website visibility and discoverability over the next two years, website performance ranked first, selected by 34%. It came ahead of AI assistants and recommendation engines and AI-generated search results, both selected by 30%, as well as brand reputation and trust signals at 29%.

What will have the greatest impact on visibility over the next two years?



The findings underline how closely technical performance is tied to commercial outcomes, and the consequences of getting it wrong are growing. Nearly one in four businesses has experienced revenue loss due to downtime in the past year, while 24% have seen conversion rates fall because of site speed. More than a quarter have also experienced higher bounce rates or customer problems during periods of peak traffic.

Businesses say customer churn, brand damage, search ranking losses and lost revenue are now almost equally serious concerns when a site slows or fails. Performance now affects the full commercial journey: whether a brand is recommended, whether a customer remains on the site, and whether interest becomes revenue. In turn, this has made performance a board-level growth priority.

Case study

Extra Chill's experience shows how reliable performance can turn visibility into revenue. Its previous shared hosting setup struggled as traffic increased, creating concerns around speed, stability and scalability. After moving to Cloudways, the independent music platform was able to handle 30,000 visits in a single afternoon, generating more than \$1,500 in advertising revenue in one day. The result was a stronger technical foundation that allowed Extra Chill to capitalize on sudden attention without compromising the user experience.



[Read More](#)

Preparing for less predictable demand

AI is not only changing where website demand comes from. It is making that demand harder to predict. Recommendations can produce unexpected bursts of customer attention, while crawlers and automated systems create additional pressure behind the scenes.

A quarter of businesses have already experienced infrastructure strain from AI crawlers or bots, with a further 23% having faced traffic surges that directly affected website performance.

This creates a different kind of readiness challenge. Websites must be able to scale when demand rises, maintain performance during peak periods and detect problems before customers are affected.

Case study

PicClick's experience shows why AI-ready businesses need infrastructure that can scale without adding operational complexity. Before Cloudways, the visual search platform faced limitations around customization, support and manual server management. With Cloudways, it scaled from around one million to more than 40 million monthly visitors without increasing its IT headcount or making major cost changes. Servers could also be scaled within minutes, giving PicClick the resilience and agility needed to respond to sustained growth and sudden increases in demand.

[Read More](#)



Businesses are rising to the task. Ahead of major retail events, 39% are preparing for traffic from AI search recommendations and shopping platforms. The same proportion are investing in site speed and Core Web Vitals, while 36% are introducing automated scaling or performance optimization.

The AI confidence gap

Businesses believe they are ready for AI. Their operating models tell a different story.

While 95% of businesses describe their performance management model as proactive, just 9% continuously test their infrastructure through automated monitoring. Although rare in both markets, UK businesses are four percentage points more likely to have automated monitoring in place than their US counterparts.



With short delays so consequential to lost sales and damaged trust, automated monitoring is increasingly important.

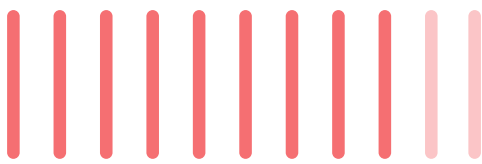
However, over one in five (21%) businesses still typically discover server issues through customer complaints. While the experience has already been damaged by this point, resolution takes time, with most server and website performance problems taking between 15 and 59 minutes to fix once identified.



21%

Over one in five (21%) businesses still typically discover server issues through customer complaints.

Security is also emerging as a key area of readiness. Although four in five (80%) are confident that their hosting set up is optimized for strong security, 82% are concerned that novel AI-powered cyberattacks threaten their website's availability and performance.



82%

fear AI-powered cyberattacks could threaten website availability and performance.

The result is a widening gap between perceived readiness and operational capability. As AI accelerates digital demand, businesses that continue relying on reactive processes risk becoming less resilient, less visible and ultimately less competitive.



To be truly ready for the AI era, businesses need to assess their operational maturity. This includes continuous monitoring, early detection, rapid diagnosis, automated optimization and infrastructure that can respond as demand changes. Taking this step from reactive troubleshooting to proactive, AI-powered operations is a must to maintain visibility.

Suhaib Zaheer,
GM Cloudways and Senior VP Managed Hosting at DigitalOcean.

Closing the AI Visibility Gap

Performance and infrastructure are becoming essential foundations for visibility in an AI-led world.

Authoritative content that genuinely helps AI systems understand expertise is essential, but must be supported with a fast, reliable and accessible website that customers and automated systems can use without friction.

That makes visibility a shared, business-wide responsibility. Marketing teams need to understand how technical performance affects discovery and conversion. Technical teams need to recognize the role infrastructure plays in reputation, customer acquisition and growth. Reliability is already becoming an operational measure.



81%

of businesses say speed, uptime and reliability have become a greater priority, while nearly four in ten are actively preparing for traffic from AI search and recommendation platforms.

Investment alone will not close the gap, and businesses need a clear view of AI-driven traffic. Almost four in five (78%) already track referrals from AI platforms, providing a starting point for understanding which tools send visitors to the brand, what those visitors need and how they behave after arriving. This practice must become ingrained across the business as customer behavior continues to change.



CLOUDWAYS
by DigitalOcean



AI visibility should be treated as an ongoing discipline, not a one-off optimization project. Brands need to monitor how they are represented, strengthen weak signals and keep their digital presence current.

Suhaib Zaheer,
GM Cloudways and Senior VP Managed Hosting at DigitalOcean.

AI Visibility maintenance checklist:

Is your website ready to support AI-led discovery?

	READY	NEEDS ATTENTION
Key pages load quickly on desktop and mobile	☐	☐
Core Web Vitals are monitored and meet target thresholds	☐	☐
Uptime is tracked continuously	☐	☐
Alerts are triggered when speed, availability or server performance drops	☐	☐
Performance issues are detected before customers report them	☐	☐
Average incident detection and resolution times are measured	☐	☐
Infrastructure can scale during traffic spikes and peak trading periods	☐	☐
The website is regularly stress-tested against sudden demand	☐	☐
AI crawlers and bots are monitored for unusual server load	☐	☐
Important search and AI crawlers can access key website content	☐	☐
Security updates, firewalls and malware protection are actively maintained	☐	☐
Backups are automated, tested and easy to restore	☐	☐
AI referral traffic is tracked separately from traditional search traffic	☐	☐
The commercial cost of downtime is understood	☐	☐
Marketing, technical and leadership teams review performance together	☐	☐

YOUR RESULT

13–15 READY

Your infrastructure is well prepared to support AI-led discovery.

9–12 READY

Strong foundations are in place, but several gaps could weaken visibility or resilience.

FEWER THAN 9 READY

Your business may be exposed to avoidable performance, trust and visibility risks.

Be seen, be ready

AI is changing how brands are discovered, and visibility can no longer be treated as a search or content challenge alone. Website performance is becoming an essential part of how businesses are found, assessed and recommended.

Our AI Visibility Gap report will track how businesses in the UK and US adapt to these changes, helping organisations benchmark their readiness and identify the practical steps needed to remain visible as the rules of discoverability change.

As discovery becomes more automated and digital demand less predictable, the gap between perceived readiness and genuine capability will become harder to ignore. The businesses that close it will not simply attract attention. They will have the hosting foundation required to turn that attention into trust, action and growth.

Methodology

The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 1,000 DMs (500 in UK and 500 in US) in digital (mid-market, scale-ups, enterprise digital teams) and eCommerce businesses. The data was collected between 24.06.2026 – 29.06.2026. Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the British Polling Council (BPC), and a signatory of the Global Data Quality Pledge. We adhere to the MRS Code of Conduct and ESOMAR principles.

The average cost (£424,000) was calculated using the midpoint of each survey response band, weighted by the percentage of respondents selecting each option. Midpoints used were £500 (less than £1,000), **£5,499.5** (£1,000–£9,999), **£29,999.5** (£10,000–£49,999), **£74,999.5** (£50,000–£100,000) and a conservative assumed value of **£110,000** for the open-ended “**More than £100,000**” category. Respondents who selected “**Not sure**” were excluded from the calculation. The resulting weighted average was rounded to the nearest £1,000. This was then converted to US dollars using the global exchange rate on 3rd September 2026.

The annual estimate (£336,000 a year) combines the weighted average revenue impact of one hour of downtime (Q13) with the weighted average number of downtime hours experienced in a typical three-month period (Q14). Midpoints were used for each survey response band.

For downtime, these were 0 hours, 0.5 hours, 1 hour, 3 hours and 7.5 hours respectively. For revenue impact, midpoints of £500, £5,500, £30,000 and £75,000 were used, with a conservative assumed value of £110,000 for the open-ended “More than £100,000” category. Respondents who answered “Not sure” were excluded from the calculations. This was then converted to US dollars using the global exchange rate on 3rd September 2026.

Regional breakdowns

METRIC	GLOBAL	UK	US
Businesses believe technical website performance now plays a bigger role in online visibility than content alone	80%	81%	78%
Website speed, uptime and reliability has become a greater business priority	81%	84%	79%
Traditional SEO is no longer enough to guarantee visibility	77%	77%	77%
AI-powered recommendations are changing how customers discover brands	82%	83%	82%
AI-generated search experiences have reduced website traffic	76%	80%	72%
Poor technical performance will increasingly be penalised by AI-driven search/recommendation systems	76%	789%	743%
Businesses that have lost revenue due to website downtime	24%	26%	226%
Experienced customer issues during peak traffic periods	27%	28%	2530%
Preparing for AI-powered search/shopping traffic	39%	38%	41%
Improving website speed and performance	39%	36%	42%
Introducing automated scaling and optimization	36%	36%	36%
Website issues most commonly identified through customer complaints	21%	20%	22%
Average cost of one hour of downtime	£424,000	£47,000	\$50,000
Average annual cost of downtime	£336408,000	£376465,000	\$40035,000

