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AI, Your Website, and The Great Dietary Awakening

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Is AI Your Friend?

Whether or not you are concerned about Artificial Intelligence's (AI) ultimate impact on society, you might want to focus a bit closer to home right now: How to maintain connection with consumers despite shifting communication pathways. At the April Food Industry Summit, held at Saint Joseph's University Haub School of Business, speakers sounded the alarm for grocers.

Instacart, the third-party grocery delivery service, just partnered with tech company Anthropic to use their AI application, Claude. Claude turbocharges Instacart's ability to assemble grocery orders based on pairing shopper product preferences with available inventories of nearby grocers. The newly helpful AI acts as an agent for the shopper, a service dubbed 'agentic AI.' Great, huh? Maybe not.

First, by using agentic AI you, the retailer, are trusting not one, but two third-party providers with your customer and inventory data; in this case, Instacart and Claude. What could go wrong? Employing these apps automatically exposes your customers to competing grocers nearby based on these shoppers' previously expressed product preferences and on real-time grocer in-stock information. Do Instacart and Claude care about protecting your business? Not so much.

Second, because households largely purchase the same list of groceries week in and week out, your role in AI-aided shopping becomes extraneous. Your store is demoted to being a digital order taker with no direct interaction with the customer; if you get the order at all. And of course, you are paying for the privilege of using third-party, AI-assisted shopping applications.

Shoppers are experimenting with agentic AI, with many buying decisions starting with an AI conversation. But consumers are concerned that their data won't be protected. According to a recent study by Riskified, most shoppers don't trust AI apps to make purchases on their behalf, and nearly half don't trust any company to manage their purchases.

Trust in agentic AI has also dropped significantly since last year, with just 55% of survey respondents saying they have "some comfort" with AI autonomy compared to 70% last year who said so. Most (74%) shoppers also expect the AI agent and/or the retailer to be responsible for unauthorized purchases. The good news is that shoppers in the survey also said they trust retailers' own websites nearly as much as any agentic AI platform. Therefore, ensuring your website is user-friendly is key, a topic we'll address shortly.

SEO, AEO, & GEO

Just when you thought you'd mastered Search Engine Optimization (SEO) keywords; those essential relevant terms you hope will float your store to the top of Google's search results, here come Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) and Generative Engine Optimization (GEO). More than single words or phrases, AI platforms can, and must, accommodate more in-depth, authoritative content to answer internet queries.

For example, internet questions such as *What's the best form of protein?* will generate AI answers from citations around the web on animal-based proteins, plant-based proteins, protein powders, along with guidance on digestibility, health benefits, dietary preferences, and protein timing. The opportunity is for your website and social media to already have highly visible, authoritative content on this topic that gets picked up by AI. This is AEO.

GEO is the practice of developing your content specifically to enable AI platforms to find and use it directly. To do so, your writing must be clear, concise, extractable by the AI bot, have depth on the topic, and just as important, be visible on multiple venues such as your social media platforms. Think press releases and FAQs. Also, any third-party awards or recognition you've received for your work in an area will increase chances AI will discover and cite you.

Lest you feel overwhelmed by all this new tech, know that companies large and small are scrambling to respond to the shifting challenges of reaching consumers digitally. The most honest corporate brand managers admit they are sorting out their communications strategies daily. But one thing is clear: listing words and phrases such as *organic, bulk, vitamins,* and *non-GMO* for SEO alone are no longer enough. Marketers must now pay attention to how—and if—their company is surfacing in AEO and GEO.

To check your progress, test your store's AI search results as if you were a new customer or newcomer to your neighborhood inquiring about local health food stores. Staying on top of your AEO and GEO presence will take time and consistent effort, but AI provides a richer platform to paint a complete and more nuanced picture of your store and its offerings than ever before.

Website Pages and Searches

Simplicity and clarity. With so much digital noise competing for shopper attention, a simple, uncluttered website with clear messaging is table stakes. Think Google's landing page: sparse, with lots of white space. Identify your store's most important one or two attributes and make sure these are what visitors to your website see first, both on large computer screens and small smartphone screens.

Before visitors can reach your website, though, they must search for your store online. It's worth doing some test searches to see where your store surfaces—also on large and small screens. Separately search different terms including *health foods, natural foods*, and *organic foods*. When you enter these one at a time, you may be surprised at the varying results that may or may not include your store.

Once on your website, make sure all your pages and links work. I randomly tested several independent natural retailers' website pages and found many oopsies. For example, on one high-volume, multi-store website with a large, prepared foods program, the *to go* link did not load. Photos

of catering plates were too small to identify individual items, and there were no accompanying descriptions, just pricing. The company's *blog posts* link returned the *error 404 page not found*.

And, while website viewers can enlarge font sizes on the screen, some may not know how to do that. If you feel you must use tiny font sizes 4 or 6 to fit all your content, you probably are jamming too much information onto the page. Also, use solid-color fonts with contrasting background. A soft, silvery grey font on a subtle slate-colored background may look elegant to you but may not be legible to those with older eyes.

Links

Another area filled with landmines are the links you include on your website. Sites of independent retailers I visited had Instagram links of posts that didn't load for *shop, contacting us,* or *vendor tastings*. Instagram may also require visitors to set up a profile to view your store's posts; a sure way to lose their attention. The same goes for Pinterest. If you link Facebook, be sure the *about, reels*, and *photos* links work. And if you link to X (formerly Twitter), make sure you have postings for visitors to read.

If you allow online ordering, be sure you clearly show your delivery area, disclose any fees, state whether sign-ups for an account are necessary, or if guest ordering is okay, and what payment options there are. Also, list which delivery apps can and can't be used, like DoorDash and DashPass subscriptions.

What happens when visitors click on your *contact us* link? Does Captcha require verifying they aren't robots? Does a *cookies* warning pop up and stay on the screen, interfering with what is behind it? Is it easy for the visitor to select cookie preferences? Finally, consider a static map for store directions. If you allow Google maps to be a dynamic link to directions, you may inadvertently lose your visitors to whatever foreign web links pop up in the map.

Final Website Thoughts

It may be time for a website overhaul. If you decide to rebuild, start by designing your site for small smartphone screens. These translate more easily to large PC screens, but not the other way around. For a good example, see *TikTok* short videos. This is state of the art for audiovisual display on small screens.

By paying attention to and removing obstacles to a smooth shopping and browsing experience, you'll improve your website's ability to attract and retain customers. Perhaps one website oopsie won't turn off a customer, but a half-dozen probably will.

"Oh, yeah, email, too."

If you send out email blasts to your customer list, it is worth checking with someone on that list to ensure what comes through is what you expected. Here is an email that came to me from a good, longstanding independent natural foods retailer highlighting one of the store's vendors, a local baker. It came from *donotreply@wordpress.com* with a subject line, *Meet The Baking Agent*. Here's what was displayed in the body text:

[et_pb_heading title="Meet The Baking Agent" _builder_version="4.24.2" _module_preset="default" title_font="Baker Name|700|||||||" title_text_color="#8A2529" title_font_size="45px"

title_font_size_tablet="45px" title_font_size_phone="30px" title_font_size_last_edited="on|phone" global_colors_info="{}"][/et_pb_heading]

GLP-1 and "The Great Dietary Awakening"

How many people are taking GLP-1s? A mid- to late 2025 Gallup survey found 12.4% of U.S. adults reported taking GLP-1 medicine specifically for weight loss. That's 31.3 million U.S. adults with less appetite who are probably under-consuming protein and at risk for prematurely losing muscle mass. This raises the opportunity for you as an independent natural products retailer to tout your longstanding dietary and nutritional bona fides.

Much as the early 2020's Covid-19 pandemic drove millions into natural foods stores to bolster immunity and resilience, the GLP-1 phenomenon is causing a population-wide rethinking of dietary choices. With less appetite, GLP-1 users are being more selective, opting for higher quality, nutrition- and protein-dense foods despite their often-higher prices. As a result of this profound shift in food perception, we are coining the term, "The Great Dietary Awakening."

The latest findings on consumer attitudes towards food come from the Hartman Group, which found that 60% of consumers read labels and are paying close attention to food processing. How much or little a food is processed is now the primary lens—the gatekeeper—through which consumers evaluate food choices. Hartman says trust in food marketers' claims is fragmenting, and that there has been a shift from passive acceptance of claims to active interpretation.

For example, if a food makes a high-protein claim but is also highly processed, it undermines consumer trust. To be believable, claims must be substantiated through identifiable ingredients, signs of freshness, package design consistent with the claim, and other visual and intuitive cues as proofs.

Also propelling this dietary shift, state and federal policymakers are connecting the dots between ultra processed foods, harmful additives, chronic disease, and the escalating costs of health care. States are banning certain industrial food additives and, along with the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicare Advantage plans, taxing or restricting the availability of soda and other low-nutrition food categories.

Parents are also increasingly steering teens toward healthier food choices. According to a recent NielsenIQ survey, more than a third of parents of Gen Alpha children born before 2010 look for high protein and natural ingredients in snacks. And a quarter of all shoppers say they avoid synthetic additives and dyes. Kids themselves are skeptical of traditional brands' claims and view third-party sources and social media influencers as more trustworthy sources.

A Dawning Golden Age?

With all these segments of society simultaneously reevaluating food choices, if there were ever a better opportunity to address diet on a global scale, I can't think of one. Now may be the best moment in a generation to remind the public of your expertise in shaping healthy diets both for those wishing to maintain their good health, and for those with chronic preventable diet-related conditions and diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, fatty liver, and obesity. **JJ**