

Chapter 1: Deep Thinking in the Age of Instant Answers

Throughout history, disruptions to the status quo, such as pandemics, wars, or economic recessions, can either sink a business or elevate it to new heights. Every disruption creates a *seam* -- a moment where the fabric of culture, business, or belief rips just wide enough for an innovator to crawl through and create something new.

We might be living in the ultimate seam.

Google CEO Sundar Pinchai calls AI the most significant innovation in human history -- more important than fire, medicine, or the internet. The power of AI seems absolute and threatening. For many, it's terrifying.

This book will help you view disruption through a different lens: not fear, but immense possibility.

Let's begin with your new second brain.

The Phronesis Thesis

I've written 12 books, and each one is like earning a master's degree. I study, research, and write on a topic for two years, and during that time, a process called

phronesis kicks in. Living with this new knowledge over a long period ingrains it deeply within me, resulting in practical and fresh wisdom.

This wisdom becomes fuel for teaching, speaking, and consulting. It becomes embodied knowledge. It forges new confidence.

AI doesn't do that.

I've used it to write blog posts and books. It doesn't work -- not for this deep work. AI scrapes the past and assembles it into something coherent. But I don't write for coherence. I write for resonance. For surprise. For truth.

Mere coherence is not good enough for a book. My writing is me -- my stories, my dot-connecting, my missteps, and yes, my dad jokes. My human perspective still matters. In fact, *it's essential*.

But I also know I'm an outlier.

Most people won't take the long and winding road to new knowledge. Why would they? They'll take the shortcut. But shortcuts don't create wisdom. They create the illusion of wisdom, which might be worse than ignorance.

And that has consequences.

When Thinking Becomes Optional

When we let AI think for us, our capacity to think for ourselves atrophies.

In *Being Human in 2035*, global experts predicted that our capacity for deep, critical thought will decline as AI becomes embedded in daily life.

Russell Poldrack, professor of psychology at Stanford, put it bluntly: “The ability of AI systems to perform increasingly powerful reasoning tasks will make it easy for most humans to avoid having to think hard and thus allow that muscle to atrophy.”

We’re not just losing knowledge -- we’re losing *cognitive muscle*.

Ken Grady, innovation writer and adjunct professor at Michigan State University, takes it further: “AI is a form of self-inflicted dementia. We continue to offload functions to digital systems ... all of which will lead to the diminishment of our capacity for moral judgment.”

This isn’t about laziness. There are numerous and wonderful ways to use AI to enhance productivity and establish new businesses. But when most customers opt for the shortcuts, we need to ask ourselves: how do we connect with customers when thinking becomes optional?

The Science of Decline

Let me kick a crusted turd.

Almost any quote from tech industry leaders claims that AI will merely "augment" our intelligence. This is a comfortable half-truth -- a PR-friendly framing that helps tech companies ease public concern while accelerating adoption.

In theory, yes: AI *can* augment our thinking. It frees us from mundane tasks, surfaces insights, and expands our creativity. But in practice? We're already seeing signs that AI is often used as a shortcut *around* thinking, not a support *for* it.

When AI systems handle complex problem-solving, data analysis, and even creative processes, humans experience what researchers refer to as *cognitive offloading*.

We turn to ChatGPT instead of struggling to come up with our own ideas. We get summaries instead of reading for ourselves. We request rewrites instead of human revisions. The friction that once led to insight -- the long walk around the block to solve a problem -- is bypassed. And without that friction, we risk losing something essential: depth, synthesis, struggle, originality.

This isn't paranoia. It's proven.

- A study by the University of Pennsylvania found that students who regularly used AI for complex assignments showed a decrease in improvement in analytical reasoning skills compared to those who worked through problems themselves.ⁱ
- An MIT study found ChatGPT users showed “lowest levels of brain activity” and that “frequent AI use may negatively influence critical thinking and memory.”ⁱⁱ
- A Microsoft study showed a correlation between the confidence employees had in AI and their cognitive decline. In other words, the more people trust AI to think, the less they think.ⁱⁱⁱ

When tech leaders say, "AI will enhance your brain," it's not wrong, but it's incomplete. It can do that just like a calculator can enhance your math, but it often becomes a crutch that weakens the very thing it promises to improve.

It's not just a partial truth. It's partial ethics.

Cognitive offloading is well-documented. When we use tools to store or process information, our brains are freed from that work. That's not always bad. Google Maps, for example, means we no longer memorize directions or fumble with a paper map. But there's a cost.

My friends, we are being rewired. Using AI as a cognitive crutch can dull our ability to analyze, question, and invent -- skills essential to marketing strategy and creativity.

The New Shortcut to Certainty

AI doesn't just provide answers. It offers confident answers. Quick. Polished. Definitive.

And that illusion of certainty? It's one of AI's most dangerous traits.

Rosalie R. Day, digital policy expert and consultant, warns: "With predictive models advancing, human decision-making will become increasingly influenced by non-human actors. This could significantly undermine people's sense of agency and curiosity."

The more we rely on AI to think for us, the less we *need* to think at all.

In sales and marketing, nuance matters. Context matters. Empathy, paradox, and moral tension -- these are the layers that make brands believable and campaigns resonant.

And shortcuts don't get us there.

The Curious Few Will Rule Tomorrow

There is a positive side to this development.

The relationship between AI and critical thinking is not entirely negative. Dr. Ethan Mollick at the Wharton School suggests that AI tools can *enhance* critical thinking by handling routine tasks, allowing humans to focus on higher-order thinking and creative problem-solving.

If you're a curious person, AI opens entirely new windows for deep learning.

When I dive into a new subject, AI's research capabilities help me explore challenging rabbit holes of diverse thought. I use ChatGPT's deep search function to create private "mini books" that fuel my curiosity and growth.

Later in the book, I'll address personal meaning and purpose. I wondered, how does a person establish their purpose in life and how does AI threaten this? Deep research from AI provided something like an encyclopedia entry on the topic. Although the book chapter is short, I spent an hour joyfully learning about something fascinating and new.

Every day, AI provides me with mini-lessons on new animals I see, new places I'm visiting, and anything that makes me curious in the moment.

Instilling this sense of confident curiosity must become a priority for the school systems. Some universities already incorporate "AI literacy" into their curricula, teaching students to critically evaluate AI-generated content and understand the limitations of these systems.

That's progress, but I wonder if many school districts, steeped in traditional education and run by politically appointed school boards and unions, can rapidly adapt to the AI-first world.

The Marketing Context: Algorithms Are Your New Best Customer

Let's delve further into how this trend affects our customers and businesses.

We're now in a world of *collaborative intelligence*. This fundamentally alters how customers make purchasing decisions.

Academics often suggest combating cognitive offloading with better critical thinking skills. But let's be real -- we're fighting human nature. If people prefer bots to do their thinking, marketers will have to adjust.

As more people lean on AI for answers, context, and judgment, their buying decisions will become passive reactions to algorithmic cues.^{iv}

Here's the uncomfortable truth. When AI becomes your customer's brain, AI becomes your customer. More precisely, Big Tech becomes your customer.

The moment your content is summarized, rated, or recommended by a machine, you're speaking to the algorithm instead of a person.

A helpful analogy: If you're in the diaper business, babies are the end user, but they are not the decision maker. You market your product to the caregiver responsible for the baby's rear end. Likewise, when the algorithm is the "caregiver," you need to sell to it.

Perhaps this is the first business book you've read that mentions "turd" and "rear end" in the same chapter. No need to thank me.

We need to influence the AI, but how can we crash the code and access these secret algorithms?

Reverse Engineering the Robot Judge

A new discipline is emerging to trace the "signals" that AI platforms follow to form their conclusions. Researchers from Muck Rack analyzed 1 million AI responses to help us see how the information is prioritized. Here are some findings:

- Approximately 95% of the AI responses derive from non-paid (non-advertising) content sources. The three most important sources for AI referrals are 1) corporate blogs and other owned media, 2) journalism, and 3) academic research.
- Signals from social media conversations and shared content had a minor impact on the bots.
- Fresher content beats older content. A study by Ahrefs found that the average age of content cited by AI assistants is 1,064 days, compared to 1,432 days for content referenced by traditional search engines. That's 26% “fresher.”
- Authority of the source matters. Sources with a high reputation, like Reuters and the *Financial Times*, are heavily cited.

The research also found that the most essential sources vary based on the type of query, which makes sense. A more academic question deserves a more academic response, for example.

So how does a brand make it onto an AI's shortlist? Andy Crestodina, the founder of Orbit Studios, is on the cutting edge of strategies to influence the AI algorithms. He contends that traditional content marketing works, but with a twist. Andy put it succinctly: "Our job now is to train AI to become a sales rep for our brands by feeding it all of the important sales and marketing messages." He articulated two core strategies:

1) On-site Content

Your website is still your strongest platform. AI language models are heavily trained on *owned media* -- your blog, product pages, case studies, and FAQs. It's never been more critical to be *ridiculously* explicit about:

- What you do, and who you do it for
- Services, features, and benefits
- Unique selling points and use cases
- The locations you serve
- The challenges you solve

Every detail you add is another data point informing AI's responses.

2) Off-site presence

The influence doesn't stop at your own domain. AI also hoovers up data from:

- Online directories
- Review sites
- Trade publications
- Podcasts

- YouTube transcripts

Where SEOs once obsessed over backlinks, Andy notes that the real signal for AI seems to be the "co-occurrence" of your brand name with industry terms, regardless of a website's authority. It's about brand mentions and context more than backlinks.

Marketing is still about storytelling, differentiation, and connection ... with the bots in mind. This demands:

- **Extreme clarity:** Content must be unambiguous and concise. AI doesn't reward cleverness or implication. It "reads" explicit statements.
- **Wide digital footprint:** Place your brand, with industry-relevant context, everywhere you can legitimately do so.
- **Collaboration:** Guest posts, podcast appearances, and industry partnerships all feed the AI.

Andy's biggest tip: "Just do good marketing and look for chances to include your elevator pitch or value proposition in every piece of distributed content." Over time, this builds an AI-friendly footprint.

Like traditional search, recommendations are generally coming from fresh, high-quality, authoritative sources. No ads. No influencers. No noise.

For now, the old marketing and PR playbook generally works.

Surrender to the Bots

Here's a marketing must: Ensure you're *not* blocking AI crawlers from accessing your website. As Andy put it, "blocking your marketing content from an AI bot is

like de-indexing yourself from Google." At a time when automated systems form the biggest buyer guides and recommendations, intentionally keeping your content out of the AI ecosystem costs you visibility and opportunity.

That's triggering for many creators. After all, AI feeds on our work, without permission. Without attribution. Without compensation. Lawsuits are flying. Outrage is boiling.

But here's the truth: The economic value of content that is not seen and shared is zero.

You're working hard to create fantastic content. Now your job is to help that content move through your audience and beyond. That means optimizing for content *transmission*.

Ask yourself: If you protect your content from AI -- a foundational technology for customer decision-making -- and your competitors don't, who wins?

Same Fight, Different Decade

This isn't the first time we've had this debate.

In the early days of content marketing, your boss probably said: "What??? You want me to give away my content and best ideas *for free?*"

Yes. Because if you didn't, your competitors would. Their content would be discovered, highlighted, shared -- and you'd lose.

The same is true with AI.

For better or for worse, information flows freely on the web. Once you publish anything, anywhere, it will probably find its way to open waters.

If you're not upset about Google using your content for free, why be upset about AI doing it?

My First Business From AI

A few months ago, I secured my first consulting contract from ChatGPT.

A new client found me by searching for “top 10 marketing experts.” I tried this myself, and the list would shuffle on each query, but I was usually in the top 10. Friends tried this in Europe, and the same names came up.

Let's be honest. Am I one of the top 10 marketing experts in the world? No, I'm not. I could easily name 10 people in my circle of immediate friends who are smarter than I am.

But I've been publishing consistent, generous, authoritative content for nearly two decades.

That's what the bots reward.

AI is the future of search -- Google calls it *Search Generative Experience* (SGE). It's already being integrated.

My new client found me because I'm present on the web, and now I'm also present on AI. That will serve me well as search evolves.

If you block your content from AI, you're opting out of the public conversation. You're invisible. And that's marketing's greatest sin.

Feelings Are Your Last Competitive Advantage

Not every decision will be made by a thinking bot. Consumers are often irrational and tend to make purchasing decisions based on emotions.

People may start with the crystalline logic of AI, but they can ultimately make a purchase based on their gut instinct.

If AI filters out nuance, the brands that spark emotional response will break through. Emotional resonance becomes the rare differentiator in an increasingly automated consumer journey.

AI is brilliant at recombining existing patterns, but it can't feel. It can't be a surprise.

Human creativity thrives on ambiguity, emotion, humor, surprise, and the messy, irrational magic AI can't replicate. I'll cover this more deeply in Chapter 6, which focuses on AI and decision-making, as well as the emotional "overrides" that can still win customers.

If you want to go FAR deeper into this, read my book *Audacious: How Humans Win in an AI Marketing World*.

Will we be at risk of building shallow brands for shallow minds? If people lose their capacity to think and process, will everything just be ... dumb?

We don't have to go that way. Maybe forcing people to think becomes a competitive advantage. Here are some actionable ideas.

Designing Content for Exhausted Brains

People default to shortcuts. That's human nature.

So, be the shortcut. Use:

- Repetition
- Visual storytelling
- Micro bursts of content
- Emotionally resonant messaging

Say what matters. Say it well. Say it often. Don't bury your insights in a 2,000-word blog post.

You're not in a creative award competition. You're in a war for attention.

Come alongside customers at their point of need. Make it easy for them to find you.

Long Form is the New Rebellion

There is evidence that excessive screen time can rewire people's attention spans, which I address in Chapter 8.

Here's what everyone gets wrong about attention spans: they're not shrinking. They're becoming more selective.

Many of the most popular YouTube videos and podcasts exceed two hours in length. Even screen-happy young people will spend endless hours bingeing games, movies, and TV shows. The lesson is that your customers don't necessarily have a short attention span; your content might have a short *interesting* span.

If we know audiences are conditioned for speed, our responsibility is to earn the right to slow them down.

When everyone else is falling for the short-form trend, why not use depth as differentiation? Unsurprisingly, there is a consistent pattern to the long-form content that even impatient people love to binge:

1. Stop the scroll, win the click, pull them in.

- Open with a surprising fact, bold statement, or curiosity gap: *“By the end of this episode, you’ll know the one thing NASA doesn’t want you to see.”*
- Visually or emotionally jolt them -- start mid-action or mid-conversation.
- Pose a question that only your content will answer.
- Novelty triggers dopamine, making the brain lean in.

2. Build Early Momentum

- Convince them you're worth their time within the first 30–60 seconds (or on the first page).
- Jump right into a compelling moment -- skip the long intros.
- Promise what’s coming (“We’ll break this down into three insane discoveries...”).
- Use brisk pacing -- short sentences, quick scene changes, or conversational tone.

3. Deliver Dopamine Hits

- Break your content into three to five “beats” (setup → twist → payoff).

- Predictable-but-surprising arcs keep the brain in a state of engaged anticipation.
- In books, use subheadings or short chapters; in podcasts/videos, use segments with sound or visual cues.
- End each beat with either a minor cliffhanger or an emotional punch.

4. Make it Snackable and Serial

- Make stopping feel unnatural.
- Keep chapters, segments, or episodes short (5–12 min for videos/pods, 5–8 pages for books).
- End with “curiosity hooks” that lead into the next piece.
- Use series formats: challenges, countdowns, progress journeys.
- The *Zeigarnik Effect* (unfinished tasks stick in memory) drives bingeing.

5. Deepen the Parasocial Bond

- Make them feel like they *know* you.
- Speak to them directly (“You’re probably thinking right now…”).
- Share personal stories and quirks -- let them see your humanity.
- Keep tone authentic; avoid over-polished corporate speak.

6. Give Them a Progression Payoff

- Show visible advancement toward something.
- Document a transformation, countdown to a reveal, or track progress toward a goal.
- In videos/podcasts, use “previously on” recaps to remind them of how far they’ve come.

- Progress triggers reward centers. Completion feels satisfying.

7. Seed the Next Obsession

- Turn one binge into many.
- Reference related videos/episodes/chapters mid-content, not just at the end.
- Create themed series so one discovery naturally leads to another.
- End with a teaser or open question that can only be resolved by consuming more.
- Curiosity loops drive continued engagement across your library.

We Will Still Think!

Even if the research shows that the AI-obsessed are in a state of cognitive decline, customers will use their brains if you build in these “elements of binge” and reward them for their attention.

Here's what gives me hope: humans are wired for curiosity, connection, and meaning. AI can't rewire that fundamental drive. Don't overlook that hunger when your competitors dumb down their marketing into snackable TikTok moments.

Support cognitive offloading where it makes sense, but don't give up on the thinking that makes you irreplaceable and memorable. If you earn the right to make customers think, you're embedding your message in their hearts and minds.

We've briefly explored what happens when AI thinks on behalf of our customers.

Next, let's explore what happens when it feels for them.

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- ⁱ <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/without-guardrails-generative-ai-can-harm-education/>
- ⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/06/29/chatgpt-ai-brain-impact/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/publication/the-impact-of-generative-ai-on-critical-thinking-self-reported-reductions-in-cognitive-effort-and-confidence-effects-from-a-survey-of-knowledge-workers/>
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