Realpage.

DEMAND MARKETING · WHITEPAPER

AI just became your new front door

What multifamily marketers need to know to get found, chosen, and proven — navigating the new renter journey.

WHAT YOU'LL TAKE AWAY

Follow the shift from ranking to being chosen.

How a renter's shortlist is now built before they ever click. Why the old SEO playbook doesn't transfer on its own. What a website, search strategy, reputation management, and digital advertising each need to do differently. And how to prove all of it converts to a signed lease.

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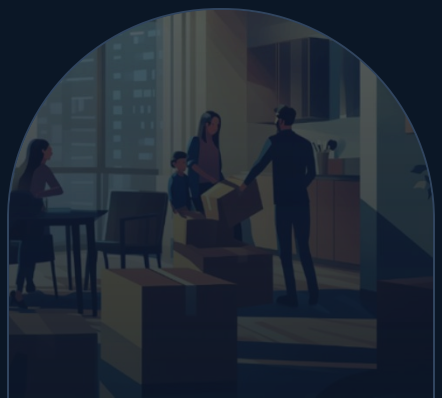
PART 01

The front door moved

Search hasn't disappeared. It's been restructured.



The question changed.

For 25 years, multifamily marketing has answered one question: how do we rank? But ranking was never really the goal — it was the mechanism. The actual goal has always been getting selected by the renter. What's changed is that a new gatekeeper now stands in front of that decision. A growing share of renters never reach a results page at all: they open an AI chat window, describe what they need in plain language — a two-bedroom under a certain budget, near a certain employer, that allows a dog over a certain weight — and AI assembles a shortlist in response. Before the renter ever compares anything themselves.

The question every marketer now has to answer isn't simply how do we get selected. It's how do we get found by AI, so we're even in the running to be selected by the renter at all.

ZERO-CLICK SEARCH

68%

of U.S. Google searches now end without a click to any website

Up from roughly 60% two years ago.

WHERE 1,000 SEARCHES ACTUALLY GO

The rest stay inside Google: AI answers, Maps, YouTube, or another search.

The numbers describe a real shift, not a temporary dip. Renters haven't stopped looking — the early part of their search has simply moved somewhere a property can't be clicked.

THE TAKEAWAY The question is no longer how many people saw your listing. It's whether the systems now building the shortlist ever saw it at all.

Source: SparkToro / Similarweb, U.S. search data, Jan–April 2026.

PART 01 · THE FRONT DOOR MOVED

Renters already trust the shortlist AI hands them — even outside multifamily.

A controlled study of real shopping behavior (48 participants, 185 tasks, across several product categories) compared how people research and decide using a conversational AI search experience versus a traditional search engine.

74%

chose AI's first recommendation as their final pick.

88%

accepted the AI-built shortlist as-is, versus just 21% in traditional search.

23%

left the AI experience to visit an outside website — compared with 67% in traditional search.

93%

of laptop purchase decisions went to just three brands — AI concentrates its recommendations.

THE TAKEAWAY This isn't just fewer clicks — it's a winner-take-most dynamic. Renters aren't cross-checking AI's shortlist the way they used to compare five open tabs. If a property isn't in the handful of options AI surfaces, it doesn't get a second look. Often, there isn't a second look.

None of that means renter demand is shrinking. It means renters are arriving later — after AI has already narrowed the field. A dip in website traffic is not automatically a marketing problem; it's often a sign that AI absorbed the early browsing that used to generate a click, and the renters who do reach your website now arrive further along, better informed, and with higher intent.

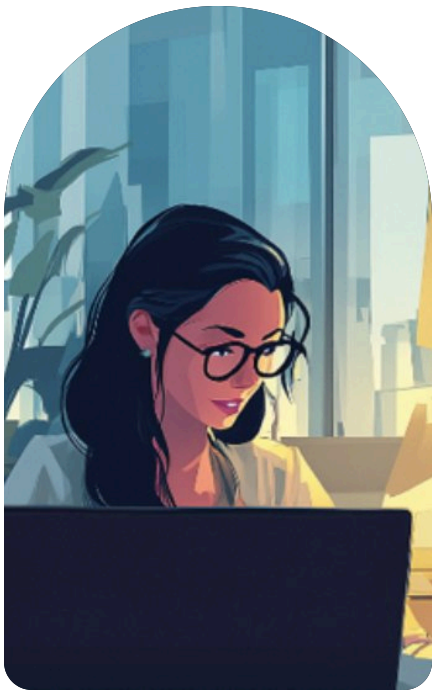
Source: Growth Memo / Citation Labs, consumer AI-shopping behavior study, 2026.

And the shortlist itself is about to change hands again.

Today, a renter still types the question. Tomorrow, increasingly, they won't be. Renters are beginning to hand the search itself to an AI agent.

THE PROMPT AN AGENT RUNS

"Find me a two-bedroom under $2,200 near downtown that allows a 70-pound dog and has in-unit laundry, and shortlist three options."



The AI agent doesn't scan a homepage the way a person does. It checks your listing against the prompt, fact by fact — pet weight limit, square footage, availability date, income requirement — and moves on if the answer isn't there in plain, verifiable text, or if there's conflicting information about you across channels.

THE OLD BAR

Readable by a person skimming with AI's help.

THE NEW BAR

Verifiable by a machine that can't be talked into anything.

This isn't a distant hypothetical; it's the direction agentic AI is already moving. And it raises the bar a second time. That shift is exactly what the rest of this guide is built to address.

PART 02

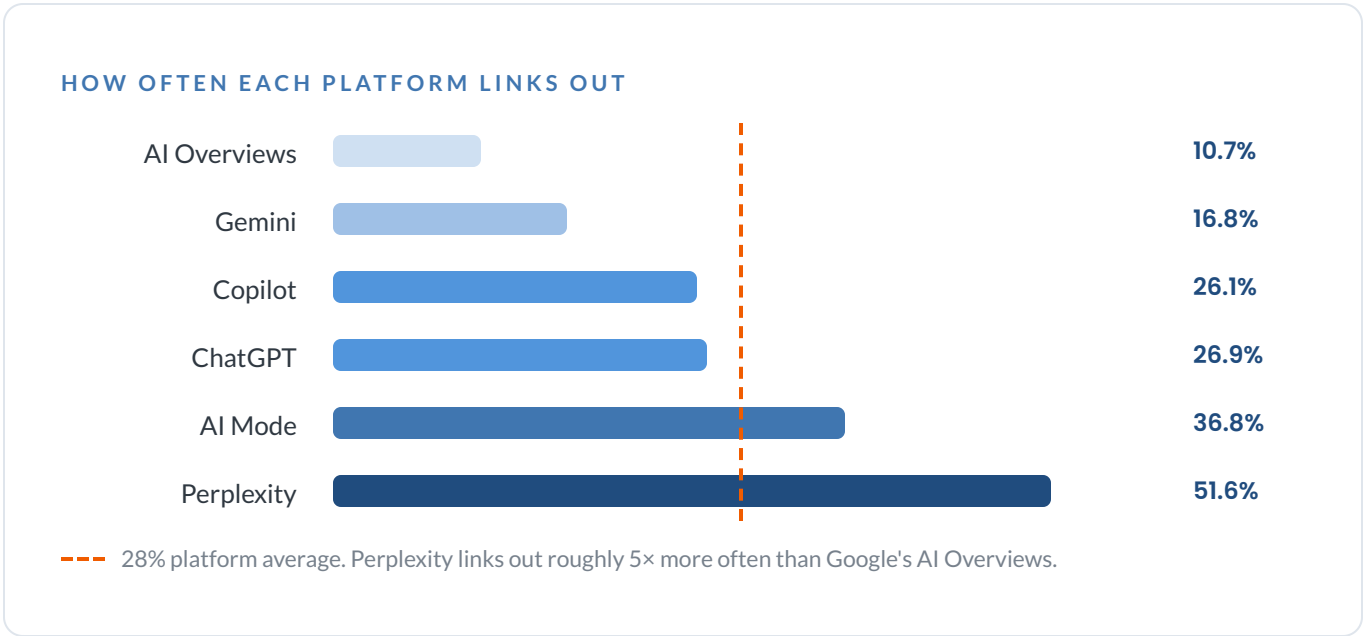
Why the old playbook doesn't transfer

Rankings and citations are not the same currency.

A benchmark analysis of AI citation behavior found that **28% of ChatGPT's most-cited pages have no organic Google visibility at all** — nearly a third of the content AI trusts enough to cite would never have shown up in a traditional search ranking. Among the pages that do rank, the study found only a weak correlation between AI visibility and the metrics that have driven SEO for two decades: backlink count, domain rating, and total page count.

Being cited doesn't guarantee a click, either.

Even when a brand is mentioned in an AI answer, a link back to the brand's own website is included only about 28% of the time on average — and that rate varies enormously by platform.



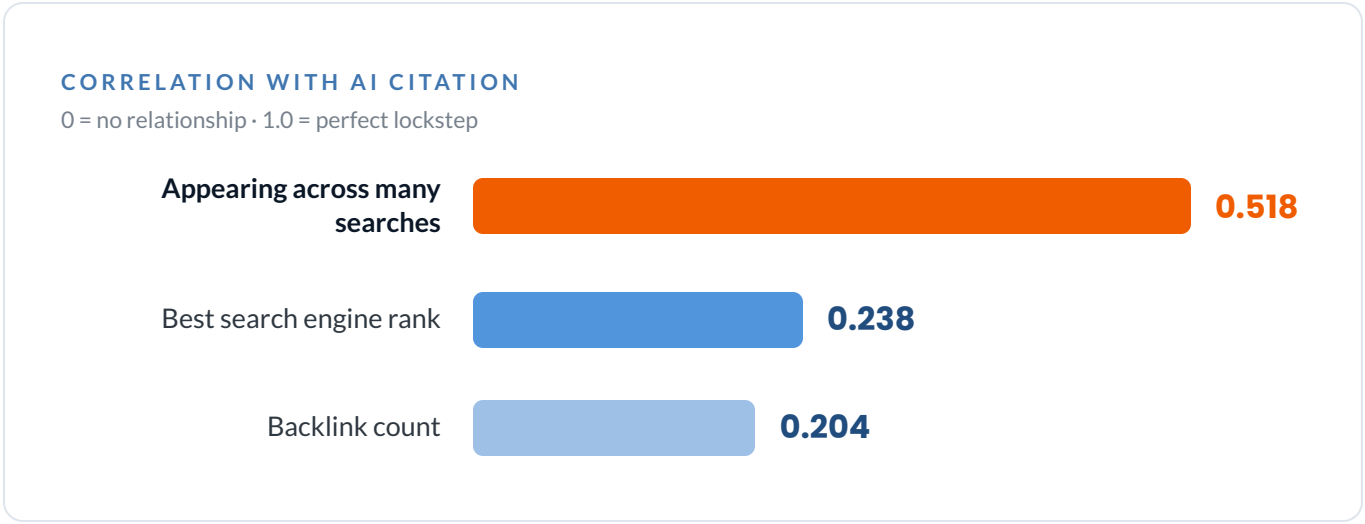
Being present inside AI's answer and earning a visit to your website are two different jobs. Winning one doesn't guarantee the other.

Source: Ahrefs, AI Search Benchmark Report, Q4 2025–Q1 2026.

What does correlate: being known everywhere, not perfected in one place.

The strongest signal the Ahrefs analysis found wasn't a technical SEO factor at all — it was YouTube mentions, which correlated more strongly with AI brand visibility than backlinks, domain authority, or referring domains. A separate multi-industry study reached a related conclusion from a different angle: structured, consistently published corporate content outperformed community chatter as a source of AI citations in nearly every industry tested. That's the reverse of the popular assumption that AI mostly cites informal, crowd-sourced content.

The pattern holds for multifamily too. An industry study of LLM citation behavior measured how many different searches a property turns up in, separately from how high it ranks for any single query — the old SEO scoreboard. Breadth of appearance was the far stronger signal.



In plain terms: showing up across many searches predicts AI citation far better than ranking #1 for any one of them does.

THE TAKEAWAY More backlinks won't save a listing AI can't parse. Structure, consistency, and specific verifiable detail now outperform the legacy authority metrics SEO has relied on for twenty years.

Source: OppAlerts, LLM Ranking Factors Report, March 2026.

PART 03

The new playbook: four places the work happens

Website · Search strategy · Reputation · Advertising

None of this requires reinventing multifamily marketing. It requires the same disciplines — website, search strategy, reputation, and advertising — doing new jobs.

Your website just became infrastructure, not just a storefront.

Every era of the website was built for someone new. The static HTML era was built for nobody to edit. The CMS era was built for publishers. The mobile era was built for every screen. The current era is being built for machines that discover, read, and act — for both humans and AI. That's not a break from the pattern; it's the next chapter of it.

WHAT YOU ALREADY BUILT	WHAT IT NOW ALSO NEEDS TO DO
On-page content tuned to rank — keywords, meta tags, clean structure	Answer-first Q&A pages with FAQ and property schema built into the HTML
A website built for search engines to crawl and renters to navigate	Pricing, availability, amenities, and policies surfaced in crawlable HTML, not locked behind JavaScript
Rich visual content — galleries, virtual tours, interactive widgets	Machine-legible equivalents (transcripts, alt text, structured summaries) alongside the visual experience
Off-page authority from backlinks and directory listings	Accurate, matching listings everywhere AI looks: Google Business Profile, ILSs, review platforms

In practice, the same activities marketers already budget for now need to do double duty.

What earns a citation is a page that answers real questions, specifically.

A property that publishes a dedicated page along the lines of *"What happens if you need to break your lease: fees, notice requirements, and your options"* is answering exactly the question a renter is already typing into AI. That page is citable. The same information buried in a PDF attached to a lease agreement is not — AI can't read it, and in practice neither can the renter comparing options at 11pm.

CITABLE

A page titled "What happens if you need to break your lease."

INVISIBLE

The same terms buried in a PDF attached to the lease.

Consistency across listings changes whether AI cites you.

1.13×

citation likelihood from a consistently published phone number

1.06×

from a consistent address across every profile

1.01×

from consistent location data — landmarks, metro, proximity

Those gains sit on top of the increase from fresh publish dates and specific, sourced numbers.

Naming matters more than it used to.

The Ashton | **Ashton Apartments** | **Ashton at Main St** = THREE ENTITIES TO AI

One community, listed three ways, scatters the authority signal that consistent naming would have concentrated in a single trusted profile.

Source: Growth Memo / Gauge, multi-industry citation study, 2026.

PART 03 · SEARCH STRATEGY

ASO is the layer built for the agent that's coming.

SEO, AEO, GEO, and ASO aren't four competing strategies. They're four layers of one strategy — each built for a different way AI finds and selects a property, and each one building on the last.

LAYER	WHO OR WHAT IS DECIDING	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE FOR A PROPERTY
SEO	A person reading a list of links	"Apartments in [city] with a pool" — your website ranks and the renter clicks in
AEO	A person reading one extracted answer	Google's AI Overview quotes your floor plan page directly, no click required
GEO	A person reading a synthesized, multi-source answer	ChatGPT names your community alongside two others, citing your pet policy page
ASO	An AI agent, acting on the renter's behalf	An agent compares your community against five others and adds — or drops — you from the shortlist, with no human ever viewing your homepage

A property strong on SEO but weak on the other layers will still rank on Google — yet still be invisible on ChatGPT, and to the agent that shows up next.

THE TAKEAWAY ASO isn't a fifth acronym to bolt onto a media plan. It determines whether an agent working on a renter's behalf can read, evaluate, and shortlist your community at all. Most competitors haven't caught up to the idea that this layer exists — which makes investing in it now a compounding head start.

Reputation is citable source material.

CITATION SOURCING

86%

of citations inside AI answers trace back to brand-managed sources

Including listings and reviews the property influences directly.

But not every review earns that citation. AI reads the words in a review. A generic review is effectively invisible to AI retrieval; a specific, verifiable detail becomes source material AI can cite directly when a renter asks a specific question.

INVISIBLE TO AI

"Great place to live!"

CITABLE

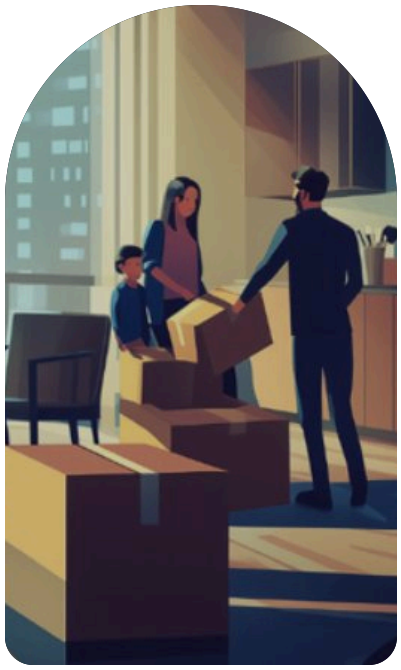
"Allows dogs up to 80 lbs, no breed restrictions, $300 deposit, dedicated dog-wash station on site."

The properties earning citations are the ones prompting for, and publishing, that kind of specific detail.

Authority now extends beyond your own listings.

Managing Google Business Profiles and syndicating consistent data to ILS partners is still the baseline, and it still matters. But AI judges trustworthiness largely on whether independent, third-party sources confirm what a brand says about itself. A listing you manage is still your own claim, however accurate. A mention on a source you don't control is a different kind of evidence — and it's the evidence AI weighs more heavily when deciding whether to cite a property at all.

That's what the next layer of authority work actually looks like: less listings *management*, more *earning independent validation*.



Source: Yext, AI Citations Study, 2025.

Proof that comes from somewhere other than the brand itself.

A presence on machine-readable knowledge bases like Wikidata (which correlates with AI citation likelihood at +0.120, with Wikipedia citations adding a further +0.077), plus mentions in local neighborhood guides, employer relocation pages, and city or transit-authority resources, all function the same way. None of this replaces listings and reviews. It extends the same authority principle out into the ecosystem AI already trusts — the difference between being known on your own platforms and being known across the web.

Advertising is playing by the same rules now, too.

Specific, verifiable, consistent data earns confidence that vague claims can't. When the same real-time data powers both a floor plan page's Total Monthly Leasing Price and dynamic ad copy, a renter sees one accurate price everywhere and pre-qualifies themselves before they call. That consistency does double duty: it keeps a campaign like Performance Max learning from high-intent signals instead of broken ones, and it's the same signal AI search weighs when deciding whether to trust a property at all.

29–34%

lower cost per conversion

Creative showing community amenities versus in-home creative, in RealPage campaign data.

VIDEO LEADS

Video is the content type that correlates most strongly with AI visibility of anything Ahrefs tested — creative carries some of this weight too.

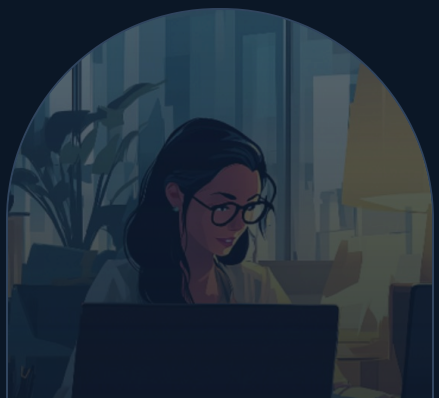
And the calls advertising generates are changing in nature. As the website answers more of a renter's questions directly, the calls that do come in skew later in the journey — fewer “what's your pet policy,” more “can I schedule a tour.” A high-intent call now increasingly means a renter has already done the comparison and put you on their shortlist.

THE TAKEAWAY Website, ASO, reputation, and advertising aren't four separate budget lines. They're four inputs into one outcome: does AI find you, does it recommend you, and do renters choose you?

PART 04

Found isn't the same as chosen

The ghost citation problem.



Getting cited by AI feels like winning. Often it isn't the whole win. Brands are cited in an AI answer *without being named* far more often than they're cited and named together.

61.7%

Cited only

The source is used, but the renter never reads your name.

13.2%

Cited and named

The outcome that actually puts you on the shortlist.

A separate large-scale analysis of AI prompt behavior reached a related conclusion: treating mentions and citations as interchangeable creates a blind spot. It's often the brands that show up consistently — not the ones producing the most content — that end up recommended by name rather than referenced in passing.

In practice, a property can be doing all the technical work and still not be the name a renter reads. Being findable and being recommended are two different outcomes, and the gap between them is exactly where specific, verifiable, consistent content pays off.

The shortlist is unforgiving.

An AI agent checking a property against a renter's prompt is running a checklist. If a fact isn't published clearly, in visible text, AI moves to the next community — regardless of how strong the photography is, or how perfect that property might be for what the renter is looking for. Confident language ("luxury," "resort-style," "pet-friendly") used to be enough to get a renter's attention. Now it needs a verifiable fact sitting right next to it, or it doesn't survive the shortlist.

Source: Semrush, via industry analyst Kevin Indig; Semrush AI Visibility Index, 2026.

PART 04 · FOUND ISN'T THE SAME AS CHOSEN

AI gets you onto the shortlist. Your website gets you chosen.

Once you've made the shortlist, AI has done its job and the decision lands back on the renter. The website is where that decision gets made. The same website that earned you the citation now has to earn the lease — and that's worth a hard, honest look. The website isn't done once it's cited; that's where its second job begins.

1. Does your copy answer the renter's remaining questions — unit pricing, sub-lease details, application process, parking specifics, lease terms — or does it push them back to a phone call they were trying to avoid?

2. Can a renter see what living there is like — explore the property, see real units, get a sense of the community and walkable neighborhood — without a leasing agent walking them through it first?

3. Can a renter schedule a tour or start an application without picking up the phone at all?

4. Does it load fast and work cleanly on a phone, since that's where most shortlist-checking actually happens?

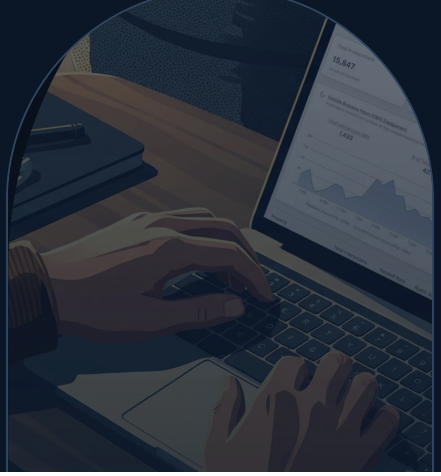
A property that wins the citation, then makes a renter work to get basic answers, loses the very moment it just fought to earn.

THE TAKEAWAY A citation isn't a vote of confidence; it's a maybe. Getting onto the shortlist and getting chosen off it are two different jobs, won in two different places: the shortlist is earned across the web, but the choice is made back on your own website.

PART 05

Proven: turning visibility into a strategic advantage

The industry has an attribution problem.



Getting found and getting chosen mean little if a property can't prove what produced the lease.

LEASE ATTRIBUTION

53%

of leases are credited to the wrong source

Cushman & Wakefield, AIM 2026.

It's a symptom of still running on last-touch attribution without the data integrity to know what really drove a signed lease. Marketers feel the gap: among teams actively working on AI search visibility, a large share still measure it by manually typing prompts into ChatGPT and checking for a mention — not by any connected reporting system. “No consistent way to measure” remains a common answer even among marketers who call it a priority.

Proof needs two halves, not one.

Being provable is two measurements working together at opposite ends of the funnel.

FIRST HALF

Proving AI is finding and citing the property — tracking visibility and share of voice across AI search the way marketers have long tracked rankings and traffic.

SECOND HALF

Proving what happened after that citation — whether it produced a signed lease.

Most platforms today can only speak to one half or the other: visibility tools that stop at share of voice, or leasing reports that start from a last touch and ignore how the renter actually got there.

PART 05 · PROVEN

Measurement isn't the point. What measurement enables is.

Done right, measurement turns attribution from a reporting exercise into a decision-making system operators can act on in real time — protecting the channels that work, fixing the parts of the funnel that don't, and redirecting spend before an occupancy problem appears. That gives measurement four distinct jobs.

01

Optimize

Keep funding what produces leases. Stop funding what does not.

02

Diagnose

See whether the problem is visibility, lead quality, follow-up, touring, or conversion.

03

Predict

Understand whether current activity is likely to produce enough future leases.

04

Act sooner

Adjust spend and strategy before occupancy or revenue are affected.

What proof requires now.

Knowing that an AI platform sent a renter to your website is a start — referral sources like chatgpt.com and perplexity.ai already show up as trackable traffic today. But a referral source alone doesn't prove a lease. Real proof means connecting that first AI-referred visit all the way through to the application and the signed lease: a single, traceable line from source to session to resident, not a series of disconnected reports stitched together after the fact.

That's the challenge RealPage Renter Reporting is solving on two fronts at once — sharpening the accuracy of attribution itself, so a lease is credited to the source that actually produced it rather than whichever touchpoint happened last, and aligning data across marketing, leasing, and property management systems so operators can see a true cost per lease by source in one place.

PART 05 · PROVEN

Why this becomes a strategic advantage, not just a feature.

Any single point solution can build a beautiful website, launch digital ads, and tell you traffic went up. Few can tell you which leases were produced. Because Demand Marketing is part of a connected suite — marketing, leasing, verification, and reporting all built to share the same data — the attribution story can be built end to end, rather than assembled after the fact from tools that were never designed to talk to each other.

THE TAKEAWAY Impressions and rankings show activity. Tracing every conversion along the renter journey shows which marketing sources actually drive leases — and that proof is what turns marketing from a cost center into a revenue driver.

This is where the story connects to the rest of the journey.

Getting found, chosen, and proven is Demand Marketing's job — and it's also just the front end of a longer one. Once a renter reaches out, that same momentum has to keep moving.

- **Knock CRM and AI Leasing Agent** turn interest into a booked tour.
- **Online Leasing and verification** carry a ready renter to a signed lease.
- **Renter Reporting** closes the loop back to the source that started it.

The throughline that opened this guide — found by AI, chosen by renters, proven by the lease — doesn't stop at the shortlist. It's the marketing spine of RealPage's connected demand engine, Demand Operations.

PART 06

Demand Marketing

Everything in this guide describes a shift the entire industry is living through. Demand Marketing is RealPage's answer to it — an end-to-end marketing solution built for the future of how renters select homes in multifamily, making every property findable by AI, chosen by renters, and proven by the lease.

THREE THINGS HAVE TO BE TRUE

01

Visible

A property must be discoverable by AI to make it onto the shortlist.

02

Chosen

A property's website and reputation must win the renter's decision.

03

Provable

None of it matters unless it can be tied to a signed lease.

ONE CONNECTED SOLUTION

- **Agentic Websites** — be the foundation AI reads.
- **Agentic Search Optimization** — stay ranked, stay cited.
- **Reputation Management** — earn the recommendation.
- **Smart Digital Advertising** — be part of the answer, not just the ad.
- **Performance Reporting** — prove what's working.
- **Creative Studio** — elevate the brand, convert the renter.

IN PLAIN ENGLISH

Being found isn't the finish line. Winning the decision is.

The front door moved from a search results page to an AI-generated shortlist — and it's moving again, toward AI agents acting on a renter's behalf.

The old SEO playbook doesn't transfer on its own, because AI rewards broad, consistent, verifiable presence over deep optimization of any one channel. Winning the new playbook means a website built as machine-readable infrastructure, an ASO strategy, reputation management that publishes citable specifics and extends its authority across the web, and advertising that still earns attention where AI hasn't caught up.

But getting onto the shortlist and getting chosen off it are two different jobs: AI builds the shortlist, and the website is where the renter decides.

And none of it matters to a business unless every step can be proven, at both ends of the funnel, all the way to the signed lease.

Found
by AI

Chosen
by renters

Proven
in signed leases

NEXT STEP

Ready to see where your communities stand today?

Talk to your RealPage Demand Marketing representative about what getting found, chosen, and proven looks like for your portfolio.

REFERENCES

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ON THE NUMBERS Third-party figures are reported as published and were current at the time of writing. RealPage campaign figures are averages that vary by portfolio; all claims require brand and legal review before external use.

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