



How Smaller Firms Can Out-Position the Giants and Win PR in the AI Search Era

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Executive Take-Away:

- AI search is prioritizing **earned media, not owned content**
- Smaller firms win by **focus, not volume**
- **Stacking budget** creates authority; spreading it destroys it
- The goal is not creating content — it's **being cited in earned media**

Gartner's Wake-Up Call: Why Earned Media Now Determines Who Gets Found

Gartner's *Top Predictions to Inform 2026 Comms Strategies* report delivers a wake-up call for professional services firms: the mass adoption of AI and public LLMs (such as Grok, ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini) is fundamentally changing how clients, prospects, and talent discover and evaluate expertise. As these AI "answer engines" rapidly replace traditional search, **Gartner predicts they will drive a 2x increase in PR and earned media budgets by 2027.**

The reason is clear: **More than 95% of the links these systems surface come from non-paid, authoritative journalistic outlets (i.e. real earned media) — not company blogs, LinkedIn posts, or paid advertising.** In the AI era, firms without substantial, high-credibility earned media risk becoming invisible to the very systems increasingly guiding decision-making.

Specialization and demonstrated expertise have always been the defining strategies in professional services. But the shift to **AI-mediated discovery demands a clear tactical pivot: move spending away from high-volume owned content generation and advertising and towards focused, authoritative, media exposure (i.e., FAME)**. In other words, firms must make a deliberate effort to earn coverage in the specific outlets that both AI systems and their human users trust most.

That means fewer pieces in higher-quality publications. It means developing content in closer collaboration with clients and prospects. And it means dedicating real resources to relationship-building, placement, and post-publication amplification. In many ways, it's old school — but in this new environment, it's exactly what determines who gets seen.

At the same time, other industry research (including Hinge Marketing's 2026 High Growth Study and Greentarget's recent *The Market Rewards Expertise*) continues to reinforce a known truth: **the market rewards specialization. Firms that are known for something specific — and can demonstrate it credibly via content in earned media, per Gartner — consistently outperform those that try to be everything to everyone.**

The general advice to “find your niche,” however, is a little like being told to “get in shape.” It's directionally right and easy to say but operationally incomplete and harder to do.

Smaller and mid-market firms understand the power of focus. They've watched national and global firms use sector specialization and thought leadership to command premium positioning. But many hesitate to follow, not out of ignorance or lack of ambition, but because the economics are different. When your partners own the client relationships — and can literally walk out the door with your firm's reputation — investing in large-scale marketing initiatives can feel risky.

Still, the reality is this: **the firms that develop, showcase, and sustain expertise are the ones that will thrive.** And the good news is that smaller firms actually have advantages — speed, creativity, and the ability to concentrate effort — that can make specialization even more powerful when deployed correctly.

The question isn't whether smaller firms can do this. It's whether they're willing to stop spreading effort thinly to start building something that actually compounds.

Here's how to do it, and how to avoid the traps that keep so many mid-sized players stuck in generalist limbo.

1. The Niche You Can Actually Own

Most smaller firms say they want to “differentiate,” but then position themselves as full-service advisors for “companies of all sizes, across industries.” That's not positioning — that's camouflage.

A niche doesn't have to mean “small.” It means focused. You can't own “healthcare,” but you can own “AI compliance in digital health.” You can't own “real estate,” but you can dominate the conversation around “adaptive reuse in urban redevelopment.” The narrower the lane, the easier it is to be recognized as the expert.

The Fear Factor

The biggest barrier is psychological. Smaller firms worry that narrowing focus will limit opportunities. “If we only talk about fintech,” they think, “what happens when a manufacturing client calls?” But the truth is, the clarity that repels a few outsiders will attract many more insiders. Clients want specialists — not because they distrust generalists, but because specialization signals mastery, insight, and confidence.

How to Find Your Lane

Start with a simple Venn diagram:

- One circle: what your firm already does well.
- Second circle: where market demand is growing.
- Third circle: where few firms have staked authority.

The overlap is your opportunity. Add qualitative intelligence from your partners — “Where do our best relationships come from?” — and quantitative data from appropriate sources. Then test the hypothesis: publish one or two strong pieces of content in that niche and monitor engagement, coverage, and client feedback.

Over time, you’ll know if you’ve found fertile ground. And if you have, double down. You’re not locking yourself out of other work; you’re making it easier for the market to remember what to call you for.

2. Stop Spreading, Start Stacking: Use Budget Concentration to Build Authority

Most mid-market firms don’t have a marketing problem. They have a budget allocation problem. The default model looks like this: \$60K annual budget spent by acquiring services at \$5K per month, every month, over 12 months. It feels responsible. It produces activity. But at the end of the year it’ll be unlikely to have produced anything enduring.

The Illusion of Consistency

Monthly spending creates motion, but not momentum. Each month delivers something — a post, a hit, an update — but none of it compounds into something the market remembers or references.

In an AI discovery environment where earned media and authoritative signals matter more than ever, that’s a losing equation.

What Stacking Changes

Now consider a different model: \$60K annual budget spent on a specific niche designed to produce content and coverage in a market with identified buyers. So, instead of twelve small inconsequential outputs, you spend \$60K strategically to create one meaningful asset, multiple media opportunities, and a sustained visibility cycle over the course of three \$20K months.

Why This Aligns with the Gartner Reality

If AI systems are prioritizing credible, third-party validation, then the goal is not to “be present” — it’s to be cited.

That doesn’t happen through scattered activity. It happens through:

- Distinct points of view
- Concentrated visibility
- Repetition in credible outlets

Stacking creates the conditions for that to occur. Instead of always losing to firms outspending you every month, win a few months by concentrating and outspending them.

The Real Tradeoff

Spreading the budget is “doing PR” while stacking it is “using PR” for strategic business purposes. Spreading feels safe but – on a small budget – it obliterates the possibility of any real return and rarely produces authority.

3. Substance Over Sound Bites: Depth Wins — Because Citation Wins

There’s a reason your LinkedIn feed is filled with short posts and reactive “takes.” They’re easy to produce and easy to forget. Big firms can afford to flood the zone. Smaller firms can’t.

And in the AI-driven environment Gartner describes, that distinction matters more than ever because discoverability is no longer driven by volume. It’s driven by what gets cited.

Why Depth Matters Now

If more than 95% of what AI systems surface comes from credible, third-party publications, then the objective shifts. It’s no longer: “How much content are we producing?” It’s: “Are we producing anything that gets picked up, quoted, and referenced by authoritative sources?”

That’s where depth comes in. Executives and journalists alike are not looking for more commentary. They are looking for material they can use — insight, data, perspective, and clarity that helps them explain something to their audience. That’s what gets turned into quotes in articles, references in trade press, and inputs into the AI systems now shaping discovery

A short post may get engagement. A substantive piece gets reused, and reuse is what creates authority.

What Depth Actually Means in Practice

Depth is not about length. It’s about usefulness and credibility. Think:

- A white paper that clarifies a confusing issue
- A report that introduces data others don’t have
- An analysis that connects a breaking development to real implications

These are the types of assets that journalists rely on — and increasingly, they’re the types of material that AI systems prioritize when synthesizing answers. When done right, a single piece of substantive content can generate:

- Multiple media placements
- Ongoing inbound requests
- A durable association between your firm and a specific issue

That is a fundamentally different outcome than a steady stream of noisy short-form activity.

How to Make It Happen

The process to go deep is straightforward but it requires commitment. Pick one topic that sits squarely in your niche and treat it as something worth owning.

Gather insight:

- Internal experiences
- Client conversations
- Survey data or observed trends
- Media & Influencers w/credibility (not most followers, per se)

Then build something that:

- Takes a clear position
- Explains something others aren't explaining well
- Can stand on its own as a reference point

Publish it under the firm's brand (see #4 Anchoring below), and then use it to drive earned media:

- Pitch it to reporters
- Offer it as background
- Use it as the basis for commentary

From there, you can repurpose and extend it into derivative content:

- Posts
- Alerts
- Speaking points

But the goal is not the derivatives. The goal is the initial asset that gets picked up and cited by AI.

The Hidden Obstacle

Smaller firms often hesitate here because the payoff isn't immediate. "We published something substantial and nothing happened." That's a fair observation but it misses the mechanism. Depth is not a one-time event. It is a signal that needs reinforcement through repetition.

One piece rarely breaks through on its own. But a pattern of substantive work (e.g., a byline and 2 or 3 quotes on a singular topic), especially when paired with focused outreach and sharing to targeted stakeholders, creates something much more powerful: Recognizable authority. And in a world where both journalists and AI systems are selecting what to surface based on credibility and clarity, that authority is what determines whether your firm is found or overlooked.

4. Anchoring Content: Make Expertise a Firm Asset, Not a Flight Risk

One of the biggest dilemmas mid-market firms face is how much to invest in individual partners whose reputations might walk out the door. The answer isn't to stop investing; it's to invest in content that belongs to the firm.

That's where anchoring content comes in: large-scale, firm-owned platforms like annual surveys, proprietary reports, or recurring roundtables that multiple partners can draw from over the course of a year. They're the perfect sort of thing for stacked budgets and, done well, they become annual events in an industry calendar (i.e., the kind of content clients and reporters come to expect, and predicate decisions on) and something competitors can't easily replicate.

Why It Works

Anchoring content is powerful because it scales across the entire firm:

- It's firm-centric, not partner-dependent. Partners can cite the data in business-development conversations ("In the report our firm published...") while the brand equity stays with the organization.
- It provides renewable visibility. Around six months after launch, release an update or new data slice to reignite attention and extend the lifecycle.
- It feeds every marketing channel. Break the data into practice-area briefings, regional cut-outs, or industry-specific versions. You can talk about it, tweet about it, speak about it, and keep it alive year-round.
- It builds credibility through generosity. Sharing original insights signals real understanding and earns goodwill that advertising can't buy.

Patience Is the Price

Anchoring content requires tolerance for delayed gratification. The first edition sets a baseline; the second shows trend lines; the third determines whether you've built a franchise. Big firms have the resources to stick with a concept through those cycles. Smaller firms often give up too soon, judging the first effort without context. But if the second performs better than the first, you're onto something — and by the third, you've built institutional equity that no lateral move can take away.

A Built-In Hedge

This approach also solves the "flight risk" problem. When partners leave, the intellectual property — and the reputation associated with it — remain with the firm. That's long-term marketing infrastructure, not just promotion.

5. Shouldering: The Art of Borrowed Reputation

When people think about business development, they imagine self-promotion. But there's a faster way to rise in reputation ecosystems: proximity.

"Shouldering" is a term I use to describe strategic proximity to recognized authority. It means positioning your experts next to the big names. In panels, in press quotes, in roundtables, in podcasts. It's not imitation; it's association.

How It Works

When a lesser-known partner is quoted beside an Am Law 20 name, it instantly reframes perception. "She must be in that league," readers subconsciously think. The same dynamic happens when someone speaks on a panel with a national figure or co-authors a piece with an established influencer. You don't have to *be* the biggest to appear at the same table — but you often do have to engineer the opportunity.

Why Smaller Firms Don't Do It

Often, it's cultural discomfort. Smaller firms worry that "riding coattails" seems unoriginal. But reputation is relational. Being quoted beside the best doesn't diminish your brand it situates it (especially in light of Gartner's findings). For a mid-market firm, shouldering is the shortest route from anonymity to relevance.

6. The AI Advantage: Winning Where Google Meets GPT

We've entered a new era of discovery. Prospective clients no longer just search Google; they *ask* AI. "Who's the top expert on pension-risk transfers?" "Which firm leads in ESG disclosure?" If your firm isn't discoverable in those conversational layers, you're invisible.

Why? Because systems are not simply indexing content, they're selecting and presenting what appears to be authoritative and those selections are heavily influenced by:

- Credibility of source
- Clarity of expertise
- Frequency of external validation

Why AI Levels the Field

Large firms have resources, but smaller firms have agility. They can experiment faster and pivot sooner. Proprietary AI tools can now:

- Identify micro-topics where search competition is low but intent is high.
- Cluster keywords and phrases that feed both SEO and AI-driven models.
- Optimize your anchoring content for LLM discovery — so when someone queries a chatbot, it surfaces your expertise.

Why Smaller Firms Hesitate

The hesitation here is intimidation. "We're not a tech company," leaders say. But AI adoption today is less about infrastructure than mindset. Pick one pilot project — one micro-topic, one chatbot optimization and test it. The cost of experimentation and iteration these days is negligible compared to the cost of irrelevance.

The Future of Visibility

Soon, the hierarchy of professional influence will be shaped as much by algorithmic fluency as by personal relationships. Firms that combine traditional relationship-driven reputation with smart digital embedding will own the next decade. And small firms that move early can leapfrog the giants who are still debating policy memos.

Conclusion: From Activity to Authority

The market is changing. Not gradually but structurally. The combination of specialization, earned authority, and AI-mediated discovery is reshaping how professional services firms are found, evaluated, and selected.

Smaller firms do not need to outspend larger ones. They need to focus more clearly, invest more deliberately, and build more intentionally. In short, they need to move from doing PR as an activity to using PR as a strategic business development tool to build and promote authority.

Because the firms that win will not be the ones doing the most. They will be the ones known for something and cited where it matters.

For more information and ideas about how to use PR strategically and spend wisely on it, please start on our website [here](#).

John Hellerman is the President and Founder of Hellerman Communications, an award-winning corporate communications agency specializing in positioning professionals to build authority, earn high-impact media coverage, and translate their expertise into new business opportunities.