BUILD

How AI Is Redefining the Operating Model for Building Material Brands

Most building materials brands don't lose in the market. They lose long before the market shows up.

A product gets written out of a spec. A distributor shifts inventory. A competitor rep gets in front of the right architect at the right moment. By the time demand appears in sales data, the decisions that shaped it were made months earlier.

This is what makes the category structurally difficult to read. Marketing doesn't influence a single buyer. It influences a chain: architect, spec, contractor, distributor, job site. And the signals that determine outcomes rarely show up in traditional data sources.

Most organizations are still operating downstream of those signals. They measure what happened after the decision. They optimize after the window has closed.

AI matters here for a simple reason. It makes earlier signals visible.

Its real power isn't automation, it's prediction. The ability to identify patterns before they are obvious, surface movement before it shows up in orders, and act while there is still time to influence the outcome.

That shift changes how building materials brands compete. From reacting to demand to positioning ahead of it. From reading results to reading signals. The difference then isn't more information, it's acting before the outcome is locked in.

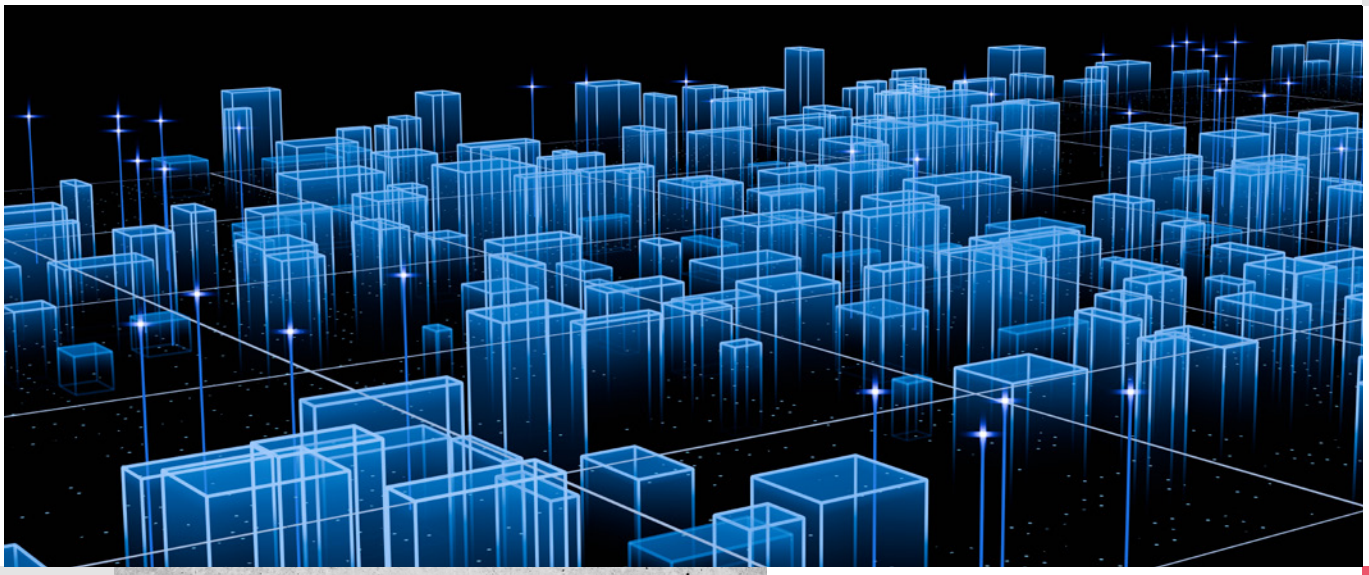
Reshaping Perspectives

This report doesn't offer a set of tools or a prescribed roadmap. It's meant to reframe how to see the market itself. Because once earlier signals become visible, the constraint shifts to how organizations interpret, act on, and organize around them.

The companies that get value from AI won't be the ones that adopt the most platforms. They'll be the ones that change how decisions get made, how teams work together, and how early they're willing to act.

Here are the five core opportunities explored in this report that reflect that shift.

- **Market Awareness:** From Single Snapshots to Living Competitive Intelligence
- **Human Understanding:** From What Customers Say to What Actually Drives Their Decisions
- **Execution Optimization:** From Post-Mortems to Live Learning & Enhancement
- **Decision Advantage:** From Certainty After the Fact to Confidence Before It Exists
- **Creative Transformation:** From Big Ideas to Rapid Prototypes



1. Market Awareness: From Single Snapshots to Living Competitive Intelligence

The Old Model

For most organizations, competitive intelligence (CI) has followed a familiar rhythm: a team is tasked to research the landscape, a report is assembled, leadership reviews it, and decisions are made. Unfortunately this is often weeks or months after the data that triggered those decisions first appeared. By the time a quarterly CI deck reaches a boardroom, the market has already moved. The issue here isn't visibility. It's how late that visibility arrives.

Ultimately, this model was built for a world where information moved slowly. It no longer fits the world we operate in today.

The Shift

"What if competitive intelligence wasn't a quarterly report, but an early detection system?"

AI makes it possible to move CI from a document to infrastructure. Instead of analysts periodically pulling data and synthesizing it into a static deliverable, always-on AI agents can continuously monitor competitor activity across channels. Looking at pricing changes, messaging pivots, media investments, product launches, hiring shifts, and more. The output then isn't a report, it's a live feed of strategic intelligence that decision-makers can act on in real time.

What This Unlocks

When CI moves upstream, the advantage isn't just better intel. It's better timing. Organizations can:

- See competitive movement while it is still forming
- Act before positioning decisions are locked in
- Compete in the window where outcomes are still flexible

This is the difference between responding to the market and getting ahead of it.

What It Takes

Capturing this advantage starts with defining which signals actually matter upstream. Not all competitive activity is equal. For example, messaging shifts matter less than specification behavior. Media spend matters less than distributor positioning. The work goes beyond simply connecting data, but instead to deciding what is *predictive* versus what is merely visible.

The JKBuild Take

Most competitive intelligence systems in building materials today are looking in the wrong place.

In this space, the competitor you need to watch most isn't always the one advertising loudest. It's the one quietly getting written into specs.

For many products, the specification chain in this category tends to be long and slow-moving. An architect writes a material into a document, a contractor interprets it, a distributor stocks what they think will move, and the homeowner or building owner experiences it. By the time a brand's sales team notices competitor activity — through declining distributor orders or a lost bid — the specification decision that caused it was made six months ago.

That lag is the real intelligence problem. A competitor doesn't need to outspend you. They just need to get specified ahead of you while your CI system is looking the other way. The pivot point in this category almost always happens upstream. None of those show up in a quarterly competitor review.

Living intelligence in building materials means watching the signals that precede specification, not the ones that confirm it. That's the difference between positioning ahead of a shift and responding after the window has closed.

2. Human Understanding: From What Customers Say to What Actually Drives Their Decisions

The Old Model

Similar to CI, the traditional audience research model is built on a standard, point-in-time sequence and approach. They're designed to capture a clear view of the customer perspective. But they're not designed to explain what that customer will do next.

Organizations invest heavily in understanding what customers think, looking at areas such as brand perception, awareness, product satisfaction, preference. But if you think about it, by definition, this research is essentially a retrospective. It reflects what customers thought under specific conditions, at a specific point in time.

That means the gap here is both speed and relevance. By the time insight reaches a strategist, it may still be accurate — just no longer actionable.

The Shift

"What if insight didn't come from what customers say, but from what they actually do, consistently?"

AI enables a fundamentally different customer research model with the idea of an always-on insight engine. Rather than commissioning discrete research projects, organizations can continuously read the signals customers are generating. This comes from areas like search behavior, social conversation, product reviews, customer service interactions, purchase patterns, content engagement, etc. Then it leverages the ability to synthesize this data into living intelligence that updates in real time.

An insight engine doesn't wait for you to ask a question. It monitors the streams of unstructured cultural and behavioral data that customers leave behind every day, applies AI to find meaning within them, and finds patterns before they become obvious. This gives strategists and marketers the ability to act on emerging truths rather than documented ones.

What This Unlocks

When organizations move beyond stated insight to observed behavior with this type of approach, they gain a fundamentally different kind of understanding.

It allows teams to:

- Identify the real triggers behind switching, specification, and purchase behavior
- Detect influences and constraints that never surface in surveys, focus groups or interviews
- Act on emerging behaviors before they are formalized or reported

This approach also comes with greater research confidence. If you think about it, traditional research generally looks at samples, whereas an insight engine reads at scale. It can process volumes of customer language, cultural cues, and behavioral data that no human research team could feasibly analyze. This helps in finding nuances, contradictions, and emerging themes that traditional methodologies routinely miss.

When this kind of insight is always available, strategy stops being informed by research and starts being *powered* by it.

What It Takes

Capturing this advantage starts with defining which signals actually matter upstream. Not all competitive activity is equal. For example, messaging shifts matter less than specification behavior. Media spend matters less than distributor positioning. The work goes beyond simply connecting data, but instead to deciding what is *predictive* versus what is merely visible.

The JKBuild Take

Most building materials brands understand their customers. They just don't always understand their decisions.

The questions most research programs in this category are built to answer center around: how do contractors rate our product performance? What do architects think of our brand? How does our awareness track against competitors?

These are reasonable questions. They're just not the ones that explain why contractors switch brands, why specifiers write-in a competitor, or why a product disappears from a region's job sites without a single brand conversation prompting it.

The reality is that switching decisions in this category are rarely driven by product dissatisfaction. A contractor who's been installing the same sheathing for four years doesn't switch because a competitor's product is suddenly better. The switch tends to be because a distributor ran low on stock, they had repeatedly bad service experiences, a rep from the other brand showed up at the right time, or availability on their go-to platform changed. Those aren't signals that show up in a brand health study. They're data signals that live in the day-to-day behavior of the trade, from forum conversations and install video comment threads to distributor inventory patterns.

An insight engine for this category could mean shifting attention from what the audience thinks about your brand to what's actually driving their next decision. Those are different questions. The second one is harder to ask in a survey, and far more useful to know.

3. Execution Optimization: From Post-Mortems to Live Learning & Enhancement

The Old Model

The post-mortem is a fixture of marketing culture. A campaign runs, results are reviewed, and learnings are documented for next time. Again, the problem here isn't the quality of the analysis, it's when it happens. Learning that arrives after a campaign ends can improve the next one. It can't improve the one that just ran. Every missed audience, underperforming asset, or inefficient placement is already spent.

The model assumes learning is something that happens after execution. That assumption no longer holds.

The Shift

"What if every campaign was designed to learn, not just deliver?"

AI is making it possible to improve campaigns while they're still in market.

Instead of executing against a fixed plan and evaluating performance afterward, campaigns can continuously adapt. This means adjusting audience targeting, creative weights, media placements, and bidding strategies in real time based on performance signals that AI monitors continuously.

The shift is from execution to adaptation. A campaign is no longer something you launch and measure. Instead, it's something that gets better as it runs. A living system that gets smarter with every impression, all without waiting for a human to pull a report and make a manual adjustment.

What This Unlocks

When campaigns are designed to learn in-flight, performance doesn't stay static. It compounds learning and improves over time.

This allows teams to:

- Continuously shift toward higher-performing audiences and placements
- Prioritize the creative that is actually driving response
- Capture value that would otherwise be lost in a fixed execution model

The organizational implication is equally important. When campaigns are treated as learning systems rather than executions, the marketing function changes. The question shifts from 'did this work?' to 'what is this teaching us, and how are we applying it more broadly?'

What It Takes

Live learning requires much more than data. It requires designing campaigns to be adjustable.

Creative needs to be modular, not fixed. Media needs the flexibility to shift. And performance signals need to be connected closely enough to execution that they can influence decisions while there is still time to act. It also requires a shift in mindset. Teams need to move from proving performance after the fact to improving it in-flight.

The organizations that get the most from this aren't the ones with the most data, but rather the ones structured to act on it.

The JKBuild Take

Building materials campaigns generate signals constantly. Most of them just aren't used in time to matter.

In this category, the purchase journey is often long and distributed across many stakeholders such as architects, contractors, builders, distributors and trades on-site. That makes it difficult to tie any one action directly to a sale.

So most brands default to the familiar pattern discussed.

But in this industry especially, the journey itself is not silent. It's made up of moments from a spec download, a product search, a website view to a distributor interaction or a jobsite visit. Each of those moments generates a signal about what's working and what isn't.

Instead of those signals sitting disconnected, they can become inputs to better decisions while a campaign is still in market. Each interaction — from a download to a discussion — becomes a directional cue for where to lean in, where to adjust, and where to reallocate effort.

The opportunity in this market isn't perfect attribution. It's using those data points to shape performance as it unfolds. To shift investment toward what's gaining traction, prioritize the moments that are driving engagement, and get more value out of every dollar while there is still time for it to matter.

4. Decision Advantage: From Certainty After the Fact to Confidence Before It Exists

The Old Model

As we've seen across these shifts discussed, most organizations are operating on information that describes what has already happened. Nowhere is this more consequential than with the decisions that shape the business itself.

Leaders are being asked to make forward-looking choices — what to stock, where to invest, what to prioritize, how to allocate precious company resources — using inputs that are, by definition, backward-looking.

Trends reporting gives you certainty, but only after the fact. Strategy requires acting before that certainty exists, and that tension is shaping how decisions are getting made.

The Shift

"What if reporting stopped explaining the past and started preparing you for the future?"

AI unlocks predictive foresight at a scale and speed that was previously inaccessible outside of the largest, most technically sophisticated organizations. By analyzing behavioral, transactional, and environmental signals such as search trend velocity, social sentiment shifts, seasonal patterns, economic indicators, category-level demand signals, AI models can identify where demand is building before it surfaces in sales data. Essentially, organizations can see what's coming rather than confirming what happened.

This shift can be described as moving from informed reactions to strategic decisions. When you know that demand for a category is building two months before it peaks, you're able to allocate budgets differently. When you can model audience churn before it happens, you choose to retain customers rather than replace them. When you can simulate the likely impact of a strategic decision before committing to it, you're able to invest with confidence rather than hope.

What This Unlocks

An organization with predictive foresight capabilities can test the market before the market is real. This kind of decision infrastructure creates durable competitive advantage and allows teams to:

- Model and pressure-test supply, demand, and incentive dynamics in simulated environments before committing dollars or resources
- Put investment behind higher-probability opportunities rather than past performance
- Reduce the risk of large, irreversible bets

Ultimately, teams move from justifying decisions after the fact to making them with a clearer view of what's *likely* to happen next.

What It Takes

Predictive foresight requires clean, connected data, and, ideally, longitudinal data that captures behavioral patterns over time. It requires model development that is specific to category and context, not generic. And it requires organizational willingness to act on probabilistic signals rather than waiting for certainty. That means leaders need to become comfortable acting on directional confidence rather than waiting for confirmation that only arrives after the opportunity has passed.

The JKBuild Take

Most building materials brands don't struggle to see demand. They struggle to act before it's certain.

Planning in this category is built on what has already happened. From insulation to siding, it's a model that has always worked in stable markets. It's a model that prioritizes clarity — but clarity only shows up once the shift is visible to everyone.

The challenge here isn't that early signals don't exist. It's that they don't look definitive enough to act on. Permit activity starts to rise. Renovation interest begins to build. Specification patterns begin to shift. But none of it feels conclusive on its own, so decisions get deferred until the picture is complete.

By the time it is, the opportunity is no longer differentiated. The advantage in this category doesn't come from seeing more. It can come from acting on what's likely before it's obvious.

5. Creative Transformation: From Big Ideas to Rapid Prototypes

The Old Model

The traditional creative process is built around constraint. Big ideas are expensive to produce, hard to test, and risky to stand behind. So teams do what makes sense. They narrow quickly, refine heavily, and commit early. Not because it leads to the best ideas, but because it feels like the safest path forward.

Unfortunately, this shifts risk to exactly the wrong place. The biggest decisions, such as what to say, how to position and which idea to back, are made with the least evidence. When the cost of being wrong is high, the rational response is to stay close to what's already worked. Over time, bold thinking doesn't get filtered out because it's bad. It gets filtered out because it's unproven.

And in that equation, playing it safe starts to feel like the only responsible choice.

The Shift

"What if the big idea was no longer the destination, but the entry point?"

AI changes the economics of creative exploration in a fundamental way. What was once expensive to produce — concept visualization, copy iteration, audience simulation, rapid scenario development — is now more accessible. This makes it possible to generate and evaluate a much bolder creative idea before committing to any single direction.

The creative process then evolves as a result. Tissue sessions replace final reveals and flexible, directional ideas are shared earlier and shaped collaboratively, rather than presented as finished work requiring approval. Creative review then can be tested through creative simulation. AI can model how synthetic audience panels are likely to respond to different creative territories, highlighting objections and opportunities before production begins. The big idea is no longer the output of a long, expensive funnel. It's the starting point for a rapid, iterative exploration that reduces risk and increases the range of what's possible.

What This Unlocks

When big ideas can be tested before they are produced, the risk of being wrong changes.

This allows teams to:

- Explore a wider range of creative territories without committing prematurely
- Identify which ideas are most likely to resonate before production investment
- Move forward with stronger conviction, rather than cautious compromise

The impact isn't just more ideas, instead it's better decisions about which ideas to back.

Creative teams are no longer choosing between safe and risky. Now with more speculative data, these teams can make better creative judgements, leaving room for the kind of bold, unexpected work that emerges when there is safety to explore.

What It Takes

This shift requires more than new tools. It requires a different creative process. Teams need to become comfortable sharing earlier-stage ideas, testing them before they are fully formed, and using those predictive signals to guide direction.

AI then becomes an input to creative judgment, but never a replacement for it. This is where the human eye and human decision making is critical to ensure unique creative perspective and strong strategic direction. The organizations that benefit most are the ones that pair expanded creative possibility with the willingness to act on what they learn in ways that matter most for their own brand and customers.

The JKBuild Take

Building materials marketing looks the same for a reason. It's not from lack of ideas. It's a resource and confidence problem.

The job-site hero shot. The contractor testimonial. The product-in-context render. These aren't bad creative choices by any means. They are likely the output of teams that can't afford to be wrong. When the annual budget is tight and the approval chain is long, the cost of a creative direction that doesn't land isn't just the production budget. It's the opportunity cost of a year's worth of marketing that didn't move the needle. So building material brands default to what's safe, what's been done before, what's unlikely to generate a bad reaction even if it's also unlikely to generate a strong one. The sea of sameness in this category is rational. That's what makes it so hard to escape.

The real constraint isn't imagination, it's validation. Most building materials marketing teams have plenty of ideas that feel bold and differentiated in a briefing room. What they don't have is a way to stress-test those ideas before committing production budget to them — to find out early whether a contractor will respond to the positioning, whether the visual language will land in a distributor showroom, whether the message that excites the brand team will actually move homeowners in ways that matter. Without that, the rational move is to stay close to what's proven.

AI is starting to change that risk calculation, providing that creative courage. Rapid prototyping means you can explore ten creative directions for the cost of producing one — and pressure-test them against real audience response before a dollar of production budget is committed. For a category where lean teams have been playing it safe for years, it's about finally having the evidence to justify making a bigger move.

This Is Not an Upgrade. It's a Different Way to Compete.

Most organizations in this category aren't limited by access to data. They're limited by when they act on it.

The signals that shape demand already exist. The difference is whether they show up early enough to change a decision, and whether your organization is structured to respond when they do.

This is what all five shifts point to. Not better information, but earlier action. Not more insight, but different decisions.

This isn't a set of incremental improvements. It's a different operating model.

The organizations that move first won't just move faster. They'll make decisions earlier, with more confidence, while outcomes are still taking shape. And over time, those decisions will compound.

This shift has little to do with the tech you adopt. It's about how much of your current model is built on waiting for certainty and what it would take to operate before it arrives.

"The question now is not 'can we?' — it's 'what if we did?'"

At JKBuild, we're actively exploring how this shift is playing out across the category.

The next step isn't evaluating tools. It's understanding where your current marketing ecosystem is built on lagging signals and what would need to change to act earlier.

Get in touch to start that conversation. Connect with Shannon Ballard at sballard@jankelley.com