“If AI Doesn’t Recommend You, You Are Not In The Deal”: Tilo Bonow On Visibility In The Age Of Machines

When an investor wants to check out a fund manager, when a journalist needs an expert, when a conference organiser looks for a speaker or when a top candidate wonders what it is like to work for you, the first stop today is not a search engine or a friend. It is ChatGPT, Gemini or Claude. “And if you are not part of the answer the AI gives, you are not in the deal,” said Tilo Bonow, founder of tech communications agency PIABO, at a recent family office conference in Germany.

Bonow, who has spent more than twenty years placing some of the world’s most innovative companies in the media - he named Google, Stripe, GitHub, Shopify and OpenAI among the firms his agency has worked for - argued that the shift is more fundamental than most family offices and their portfolio companies realise.

AI decides what gets seen

“We are in 2026. AI no longer just gives us a list of links to click through. AI decides for us what is seen at all,” he said. The machine increasingly acts “like a friend who says: you should look at this company, this product is exactly right for you.”

Bonow named four groups for whom this matters: investors running reputation checks and looking for red, yellow or green flags; customers choosing between products that, especially in financial services, often look interchangeable; journalists and event organisers building shortlists of experts; and talent asking what a firm’s culture and leadership are like. The cost of being invisible, he said, shows up every day as “lost deals, hires that don’t happen, no press, no inbound leads and sales cycles that are far too long. These visibility gaps are real revenue gaps.”

Crucially, this is not old-school search engine optimization with a few backlinks and articles. “Whether we like it or not, **AI forms an opinion on its own,**” Bonow said. “There is already an opinion out there, and it influences our business every day. Every press release, LinkedIn post, YouTube video, review or conference appearance adds to the public information environment AI systems can potentially discover, retrieve and use.”
And: “If you don’t build a clear and verifiable public record, others will shape how AI understands you.



Trust beats volume

What a company says about itself on its own website counts for little unless independent sources confirm it. "AI works like a mirror that reflects what the world out there says and thinks about us," Bonow said. The most influential inputs are trusted media - in Germany titles such as FAZ and Handelsblatt - along with specialist blogs, studies and recognized experts. The more often a claim is confirmed and repeated by credible third parties, the higher it ranks.

That is also why he warned against letting others fill the vacuum: "If we don't make sure the machines have an accurate, well-sourced picture of who we are, others will shape that picture for us. That might be a competitor, a disgruntled former employee, or someone who is angry because they did not get into an investment round."

His conclusion: **companies and families need to move "from storytelling to story-training".** And consistency is now existential. "You see it so often: the newsletter says one thing, the founder on stage says something else, and the co-founder on a podcast says something else again. In the age of AI, these inconsistencies are deadly. AI does not see your departments and structures. It wants consistency and clarity." Where marketers once said content is king, "today context is king."

Clarity in eight seconds

Much of Bonow's talk was a masterclass in narrative discipline. Good stories follow a three-step structure - problem, solution, outcome and proof - and should be built the way journalists think: *what is the story, why is it different, why is it relevant now?* "Journalists do not write for us. Their job is not to advertise for us. They write for their readers."

He contrasted the typical European product launch, heavy on gigabytes and technical specifications, with Steve Jobs introducing the iPod as "a thousand songs in your pocket", noting that only a small fraction of an audience remembers the facts afterwards. Most founders and investors, he said, struggle to break down what they do into one clear sentence. "At an event like this, the first question is always: and what do you do? You have seven or eight seconds, and you want the reaction: oh, that is interesting, tell me more." Is the message a vitamin or a painkiller?

Personal branding is a leadership skill

Bonow took direct aim at German reticence about self-promotion. Founders and leaders typically attract more followers and interest than the brands they run, and in businesses built on trust - "family offices, investments" - that matters even more. Quoting Jeff Bezos, he defined reputation as "what people say about you when you are not in the room." People remember two or three things about a person at most, and those should be under your control. "In Germany this is often misunderstood: it is not about me, it is about my product. Today, being present with a clear message is a leadership qualification."

His sharpest line was aimed at Germany's much-celebrated Mittelstand: *"We have a misunderstood pride in Germany and rave about hidden champions.* ***In the age of AI we need visible champions,*** because every product and every competitor is only one click, one prompt away."

Citing LinkedIn research on B2B buying, he noted that even where product and price are identical,

buyers - and the procurement, legal, CFO, board and investor stakeholders behind them - choose the company they have heard of and have a good impression of. Research has shown that targeted GEO measures - such as citing credible sources, adding expert quotes and including hard data - can increase visibility in generative-engine responses by up to 40%, Bonow said, depending on the domain. “Not everybody has to know us. But the people for whom it is decisive must know about us.”

GEO is the new SEO

GEO stands for generative engine optimisation. It’s the AI-era version of search engine optimisation: instead of trying to rank high in Google’s list of links, you try to get your company mentioned, cited and recommended in the answers that ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Claude or Google’s AI Overviews write. The work involves making sure there is consistent, well-structured and independently confirmed information about you in the sources these models draw on. Those sources include trusted media, specialist publications, studies, expert quotes, Wikipedia-type entries and your own website.

How it works in practice

PIABO’s approach starts with an AI visibility audit: hundreds of branded and unbranded prompts that reveal which companies the models recommend, and which sources they rely on to do so. From that comes a communications plan to influence those sources, followed by ongoing monitoring, since sources and algorithms keep changing. Asked how long it takes to shift how AI portrays a company, Bonow estimated about one month for data gathering, three to four weeks for the concept, and around three months of execution with media and content. “After about six months you should see a clear impact.” *His agency’s own biggest client last year, he added, came in via ChatGPT.*

One rule he insisted on: “We use AI extensively for research, analysis and workflows. But we don’t outsource the narrative or the final voice to generic AI-generated copy. Differentiation still requires human judgement.”

For anyone returning to the office after the conference, he offered four steps: ask what someone looking for you would actually type in, and try it yourself; identify what is missing or wrong - outdated figures, misspelled names, inconsistent data; fix those signals; and take the topic to your communications team to build a clear, professionally managed position. “Don’t forget: if you don’t tell your story, someone else will.”

The flip side: can you trust what AI tells you?

The Q&A turned to the other side of the coin, which matters at least as much to family offices doing due diligence. Having researched fake family offices, fake VCs and impersonated institutions, I pointed to a recently prosecuted US case in which a fraudster used AI-visible content to build a fake identity as a professional American football player and, together with a fake adviser who was never registered, raised millions - also because the AI was “confirming” the faked content, which the fraudsters had fed into it. (I featured this episode as one of the case studies in my article “When the Paperwork is Real: Structural Fraud, Serial Reinvention and the New Due Diligence” in this HORIZONS issue.)

This is the “single source” problem. An AI answer can sound authoritative and appear to cite several sources, yet all of them may trace back to one origin: a self-published press release syndicated across dozens of distribution sites, a set of profiles and articles created by the same people, or pages that simply copy one another. To the model, repetition looks like confirmation. To a fraudster, that is an

invitation: seed the same story in enough places and the AI will repeat it back to any investor who asks. Ten links are not ten sources if they all lead back to the same author.

The suggested remedy: ask the AI what it has read, then read and verify those sources yourself - and check whether they are genuinely independent of one another and of the person or firm being researched. Above all, claims about regulated status should never be taken from an AI answer, a website or a pitch deck. Advisers, managers and brokers should be checked directly with the regulators: in the US, the SEC’s Investment Adviser Public Disclosure database and FINRA BrokerCheck; in the UK, the FCA register; in Germany, BaFin’s company database; and the equivalent registers elsewhere. In the case above, a single lookup would have revealed that the “adviser” was never registered.

Bonow agreed and described his own three-step discipline. First, never rely on the “instant” answer modes, which are often random and prone to hallucination. Second, use deep research modes and specify in the prompt that only reputable sources such as the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal may be used, require at least three independent sources “as a journalist would”, and exclude a company’s own websites and profiles. Third, accept that there is no 100% certainty.

He shared his own cautionary tale: searching for software last year, an AI recommended a product that matched his criteria perfectly. It turned out the start-up had never existed beyond a single blog post written before it failed to raise funding. The post was still online, and the AI served it up.

“Nothing will ever replace personal reference checks: who knows him, who has worked with him, is he serious?” said Bonow, who through his own family office is invested in more than 80 venture capital funds worldwide. When assessing GPs, he uses AI but also cross-checks with co-LPs. “This human component will not be spared us.”

Be Found, Be Sceptical: A Checklist For The AI Era

The talk had two sides: making sure the machines see you accurately, and checking for yourself what they tell you about others before you rely on it. Here is what to work through on each side.

Part 1 - How AI Sees You, Your Family Office And Your Portfolio Companies

- ✅ Run the prompts others would run. Ask ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and Perplexity what an investor, journalist, event organiser or candidate looking for you would actually type - by name, and without it. Note who gets recommended and which sources the answers cite.
- ✅ Log what is missing or wrong. Outdated figures, misspelled names, wrong titles, inconsistent data between sources - and anything a competitor, former employee or disappointed investor may have put out there.

- ✅ Fix the signals you control. Website, LinkedIn profiles, speaker bios, database listings and Wikipedia-type entries should all carry the same, current facts.
- ✅ Agree one sentence. Can you say what you do in seven or eight seconds - problem, solution, outcome and proof? Is it a vitamin or a painkiller?
- ✅ Make everyone tell the same story. Newsletter, website, founder on stage and co-founder on a podcast must say the same thing. AI does not see your departments, only the contradictions.
- ✅ Earn third-party confirmation. What you say about yourself counts for little. Trusted media, specialist publications, studies, expert quotes and hard data are what the models believe.
- ✅ Decide who needs to know you. Not everybody has to know you. But the people for whom it is decisive - co-investors, deal partners, talent - must. Define that audience before deciding how visible the family wants to be.
- ✅ Give it an owner and a timeline. Take the topic to your communications team or agency. Allow around six months for a clear impact - roughly a month of data gathering, a month for the concept, three months of execution - then keep monitoring, because sources and models change.
- ✅ Keep the voice human. Use AI for research and workflows, but not for the narrative or the final wording.
- ✅ Repeat for the portfolio. Run the same audit for portfolio companies whose deals, hires or sales depend on being found.

Part 2 - When AI Tells You About Others



- ✅ Skip the instant answer. Use deep research modes, not the quick answer modes, which are more prone to random results and hallucination.
- ✅ Constrain the prompt. Ask for reputable sources only, at least three independent sources "as a journalist would", and exclude the subject's own websites, profiles and press releases.
- ✅ Ask the AI what it has read. Then open and read those sources yourself.
- ✅ Trace every source to its origin. Ten links are not ten sources if they all lead back to one author, one syndicated press release or pages copying one another.
- ✅ Check that the story is still alive. A single old blog post can outlive the company it describes. Look for recent, independent evidence that the firm, fund or product actually exists and operates.

- ✅ Verify regulated status at the regulator. Never take it from an AI answer, a website or a pitch deck. In the US use the SEC’s Investment Adviser Public Disclosure database and FINRA BrokerCheck; in the UK the FCA register; in Germany BaFin’s company database; elsewhere the equivalent register.
- ✅ Make the human calls. Who knows them, who has worked with them, what do co-investors and co-LPs say? No AI replaces personal reference checks.
- ✅ Write down what you verified. There is no 100% certainty. Record which claims were checked, against which source, and which could not be confirmed.



Tilo Bonow

Tilo Bonow is a German tech investor and entrepreneur. He is the founder and CEO of the communications agency Piabo and a speaker at Startup and tech conferences. From 2002 to 2006, Bonow was Head of Corporate Communications at Jamba! where he worked with the Samwer brothers. Prior to joining Jamba, he worked at the advertising agency O.T.W. and as a freelance consultant in the field of online marketing.

In 2006, Bonow founded Piabo, a Berlin-based PR agency specializing in tech companies, which is now one of the market leaders in Europe. His portfolio includes Tinder, GitHub, Shopify, Stripe, Silicon Valley Bank, wework, Samsung, and BMW. Initially, Bonow was active with Piabo in Europe, then also in North America - especially the Silicon Valley - until he began to expand into China in 2015. Bonow is also an investor in 500 Startups in and advisor to various venture capital companies.