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AI is changing the way clients choose accountants

When business owners ask AI for advice, which accountancy firms appear in the answer? Mary Cloonan explores the new visibility challenge facing professional services



Most accountancy firms have grown in familiar ways: a recommendation from a trusted contact, referral from a solicitor or banker or the occasional online search when someone needed help quickly.

These routes will remain important. Relationships will always matter in professional services. But something else is entering the picture, and many firms are already aware of it, even if they are not yet sure what to do about it.

In my work with accountancy firms across Ireland and the UK, I am beginning to see a clear shift in how potential clients research advisers. Business owners and executives are turning to artificial intelligence (AI) tools to understand a problem or explore their options. Not in some futuristic way. Simply by typing a question.

Questions like:

1. Which accountancy firms specialise in advising owner-managed businesses?
2. Who are the best advisers for technology companies expanding internationally?
3. Which firms have experience with private equity-backed businesses?

The difference is that AI does not return a list of websites and leave the person to get on with it. It reviews a wide range of information and produces a summarised answer. It forms an early view of which firms appear credible and relevant before the potential client has spoken to anyone.

This raises a straightforward question: when someone asks AI for a recommendation in your area of expertise, will your firm appear in the answer?

Many firms have not thought about this yet. The good news is that the foundations of visibility in an AI world are already very clear and not as complicated as one might think.

At its heart, this is not a technology issue at all. It is about how clearly and consistently a firm's expertise is visible in the market.

There are several practical areas worth considering.

Visible expertise

AI tools learn from what they can find. Articles, commentary, interviews, conference participation and sector insights all signal what a firm understands and who it works with.

A website that lists services is far less useful than a firm that regularly shares its perspective on the issues clients are facing.

An article on the challenges faced by owner-managed businesses during a period of growth tells the market, and increasingly AI systems, that the firm genuinely understands this space. Over time, these published perspectives build a visible record. Firms that contribute to professional conversations are far easier to recognise than firms that stay quiet.

Clear and specific positioning

Many professional services websites still describe their work in broad terms. Phrases like, "providing a full range of services" appear everywhere.

That language feels safe but it tells clients very little. It also makes it difficult for AI systems to understand the firm's actual speciality.

Clarity is far more powerful. Specific descriptions help potential clients understand exactly where the firm adds value and enable AI systems to connect the firm with the questions those clients are asking.

Consistent insight over occasional commentary

A single article published once a year will not make much difference. Visibility builds over time.

Firms that share short, thoughtful commentary regularly begin to build a digital trail of expertise. Each piece adds to the overall picture of the firm's knowledge bank and areas of expertise.

This does not require lengthy reports or a dedicated resource. A brief observation on a regulatory change or a short perspective on a sectoral trend is often enough. In many firms, one person coordinating contributions from two or three engaged partners is perfectly sufficient to maintain a meaningful presence.

Authority beyond the firm's website

AI tools look beyond a firm's own website. They consider how the firm appears in the wider professional environment.

Media commentary, guest articles, conference participation and podcast interviews all contribute to how a firm is perceived. They demonstrate that expertise is recognised beyond the firm's own marketing channels.

For many partners, this is already familiar ground. Speaking at industry events or contributing to discussions on specific sectors has always been valuable. What is changing is that these signals are now being read by AI systems as well as people.

The more places expertise appears, the easier it is for both humans and technology to recognise it.

Partner visibility

Professional services are built around people. Clients want to know who they will be working with and whether those individuals actually understand their challenges.

Partners play an important role here. A thoughtful LinkedIn profile, an occasional article or a contribution to a sector discussion can help. One or two partners sharing a considered perspective a few times a year can make a meaningful difference to how the firm is perceived externally.

When partners share their views on issues affecting clients, they strengthen their own credibility and the firm's profile at the same time.

Same principle, different approach

None of these ideas is entirely new. Firms that demonstrate expertise and contribute to their profession have always tended to build stronger reputations.

This principle has not changed. What has changed is how the expertise is discovered.

Becoming more visible does not require a heavy commitment, but when the steps are taken together, they can give a firm a genuine opportunity to be found when the next generation of clients begins searching for advice.

AI will not replace trusted advisers. Relationships, judgment and experience will remain central to professional services, but it will change how those advisers get discovered in the first place.

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