

THE AI TELLS.

Every AI tool was trained on the same websites, so it builds the same website. This is the list of patterns that now read as machine made on sight, why each one happens, and what belongs there instead.

18 tells

Layout, colour, type, motion, imagery, copy

Who it is for

Anyone briefing or approving a website in 2026

How to use it

Run the twelve point checklist at the back against your own site

01 / WHY IT MATTERS

LOOKING GENERATED IS NOW A COMMERCIAL PROBLEM

Two years ago these patterns just looked new. Now buyers recognise them, and recognition changes what they do next.

The issue is not that a site was built with AI. Most sites now involve it somewhere, including ours. The issue is **shipping the defaults**. When a tool is asked for "a modern website" with nothing else to go on, it returns the most statistically common answer it has seen. That answer is the same for everyone who asks.

The result is a site that looks competent and says nothing. Visitors cannot tell you apart from the last four businesses they looked at, and a growing share of them read the look itself as a signal about how much you care.

39%

of consumers say heavy AI use lowers their trust in a brand, nearly double the 20% who said so a year earlier. Among Gen Z it is 54%.

Fractl and Search Engine Land, Q2 2026, 1,008 US consumers

83%

say they can spot AI generated video, and 36% say it lowers their trust in the brand that published it.

Animoto consumer report, January 2026

80%+

of consumers want AI generated material labelled. Around 20% of brands consistently disclose it.

Fractl and Search Engine Land, Q2 2026

3

spam updates in 2026 targeted scaled content abuse, Google's term for pages mass produced to rank rather than to help.

Google Search spam policies, March, June and August 2026

The honest framing for a client conversation. Nobody gets penalised for using AI. Sites get ignored for being interchangeable, and Google acts on pages produced at volume with no editorial judgement behind them.

Every tell below has the same fix underneath it: make a decision that is specific to this business, and the default disappears.

THE FIVE SECOND TEST

Open any homepage and count. These eight are the fastest to spot without scrolling.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Purple or indigo to blue gradient in the hero | 2 Headline text filled with a gradient |
| 3 Three identical cards under the hero | 4 Inter, and only Inter |
| 5 Emoji used as feature icons | 6 Every corner rounded to the same radius |
| 7 A glass panel floating over a blurred blob | 8 A headline that would suit any business |

Three or more and most visitors under 40 will read the site as generated, whether or not it was. **Six or more** and it is indistinguishable from a tool's default output.

THE PALETTE EVERYONE WAS GIVEN

Colour and typeface are the first things read and the cheapest things to fix.

01

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

AI purple

SEEN EVERYWHERE



#6366F1 #8B5CF6 #A855F7 #3B82F6

DRAWN FROM THE BUSINESS



Uniform, signage, product, trade colour

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Indigo to violet as the primary colour, usually `#6366F1` or a hue between 255 and 280, most often as a gradient behind the hero.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Tailwind UI shipped `indigo-500` as its default button colour years ago. That code became training data, and now it is the fallback colour of nearly every generator.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Pull the palette from something physical the business already owns. Van livery, uniform, product finish, the tiles they lay. If purple is genuinely right, we shift it off the default hue and pair it with a neutral that is not slate grey.

02

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Gradient filled headlines

SEEN EVERYWHERE

Build faster.
Ship smarter.

Gradient clipped to text, two words, no subject

WHAT REPLACES IT

**CONCRETE POOLS,
BUILT IN BELROSE
SINCE 1968.**

Solid colour, real claim, checkable

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A headline with a two colour gradient running through the letters, almost always violet into blue.

WHY IT HAPPENS

It is three CSS properties and it photographs well, so it appears in nearly every template and demo an AI tool learned from.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Solid colour headlines, with weight and size doing the work. If one word needs emphasis, it gets a different treatment from the rest of the line, not a gradient across the whole sentence.

03

COMMON

One typeface, and it is Inter

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Inter or Geist set everywhere, headings and body, in a tight modern weight with negative letter spacing. Its 2026 sibling is the tasteful default: a cream background, a serif such as Playfair or Instrument Serif, and a sage green accent. That combination is now its own cliché.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Inter is the safest possible choice, which is exactly why a model with no brief picks it. Nothing about it is wrong. Everything about it is unremarkable.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

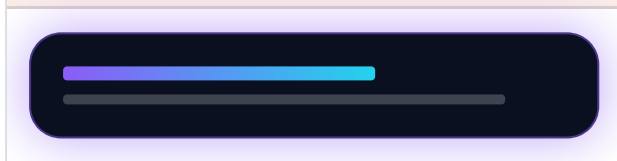
Pair two faces chosen for a reason. A display face carrying the tone of the trade, a body face chosen for reading at 16px on a phone. On this page that is Oswald over Inter, condensed and industrial against plain and legible.

04

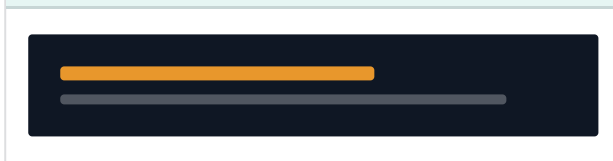
COMMON

Dark mode by default, with a neon glow

SEEN EVERYWHERE



SAME PANEL, NO GLOW



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A near black page nobody asked for, with saturated glow shadows behind cards and buttons.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Developer tooling and crypto sites dominate the training set, so dark plus glow is what "premium" looks like to a model.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Dark should be a decision about the audience rather than a starting point. A tiler, a plumber or an accountant usually reads better on paper white with a single dark band for contrast, and the glow goes either way.

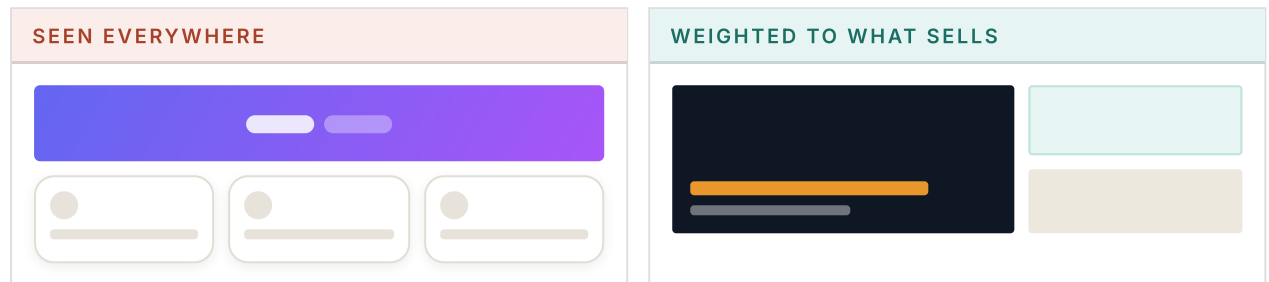
THE SHAPE OF A PAGE NOBODY CHOSE

Ask for a website with no structural brief and every tool returns the same five sections in the same order.

05

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Hero, then three cards



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Centred hero with a big headline and two buttons, then a three column grid of icon cards, then testimonials, then pricing, then a closing call to action. Always that order.

WHY IT HAPPENS

It is the most common arrangement on the web, so it is the statistical centre of the training data. A model with no layout instruction lands on the average.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Order sections by what the buyer needs to decide, and break the symmetry. For a trade that usually means proof of work above services, and a real quote or price band before any list of features.

06

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Everything is a card

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Every element sits in a white box with the same border, the same soft shadow, the same padding and the same corner radius, usually a large one. Nothing is more important than anything else.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Component libraries ship one card style, and generators reuse it for every job because it always works and never fails a review.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Use a small radius scale and apply it on purpose. Let some content sit flat on the page. Contrast is what creates hierarchy, and a page where everything is emphasised has no emphasis at all.

07

COMMON

The bento grid, used for anything

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A mosaic of unequal tiles borrowed from Apple's product pages, filled with content that has no reason to be tiled.

WHY IT HAPPENS

It photographs beautifully in design galleries, so it flooded the training data during 2024 and 2025 and became a default rather than a choice.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Bento suits content with genuinely different weights, such as one flagship project plus supporting detail. For four equal services it is decoration, and a plain list reads faster.

08

COMMON

Glass panels over blurred blobs

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A frosted translucent panel floating above soft coloured shapes, with a faint border catching imaginary light.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Glassmorphism is easy to generate, hard to get wrong, and reads as modern to a model. It also often fails contrast requirements once real text goes on it.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

One considered texture instead of one borrowed effect. Fine grain, a print halftone, a paper stock, or an actual photograph of the work. Whatever it is, it should relate to the business.

09

COMMON

Every band the same height

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Identical vertical padding on every section, identical gaps, identical heading sizes. The page scrolls at one unchanging rhythm from top to bottom.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Consistency is easy to encode as a rule. Pacing is a judgement about which section matters most, and that judgement is what the brief left out.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Give the section that closes the sale more room than the ones supporting it, and let a short section be genuinely short. A page with one unchanging beat gets scrolled rather than read.

THE PARTS THAT MOVE AND THE PARTS THAT FILL SPACE

10

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Emoji standing in for icons

SEEN EVERYWHERE



Rocket, sparkles, lightning, fire

DRAWN FOR THE TRADE



Inline SVG, one stroke weight, no library

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Rocket, sparkles, lightning bolt and fire used as feature icons or bullet points, rendering differently on every device.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Emoji cost nothing to output, so a model reaches for them when a page needs an icon and no icon set exists.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Inline SVG at a single stroke weight, or no icon at all. An icon that could sit on any of the four cards is decoration, and decoration that carries no meaning can go.

11

COMMON

Interchangeable thin line icons

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A shield, a bolt, a graph and a clock at the top of four cards, none of which relate to what the business actually does.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The card layout demands an icon slot, so something plausible gets filled in whether or not it means anything.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Icons that name a specific thing, or a photo of the real one. A pool builder gets a shell shape and a tile profile, not a shield and a bolt.

12

COMMON

Everything fades up, everything grows on hover

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Every section fades in as it scrolls into view, and every card scales up slightly when the cursor touches it. Sometimes the page hijacks the scroll wheel as well.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Animation libraries make one line of code apply to everything, and a model with no motion budget applies it to everything.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Motion earns its place by showing state or directing attention. One signature moment per page, and it respects the reduced motion setting on the visitor's device.

13

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Social proof that proves nothing

SEEN EVERYWHERE



"Absolutely fantastic service, highly recommend!" — Sarah M.

VERIFIABLE

"Quoted on the Tuesday, tiles were down by the Friday. The kerb outside was swept before they left."

Google review, Marrickville, 14 August 2026

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Five star rows with no source, invented company logos in a trust bar, testimonials from a first name and a last initial, and portrait avatars that were generated rather than photographed.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Placeholder proof is the easiest section to fabricate, and it frequently ships untouched because nobody replaced it.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Real reviews pulled from Google, with the platform, the suburb and the date attached. Three reviews a visitor can go and verify will do more than a wall of anonymous stars. Invented proof is also a consumer law problem in Australia, not only a design one.

PICTURES OF A BUSINESS THAT DOES NOT EXIST

By 2026 the obvious glitches are mostly gone. What gives images away now is context, not fingers.

14

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

Generated photography of your own work

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A finished job that never happened. The current giveaways are background text that dissolves on close inspection, one light direction across a scene that should have several, skin that reads slightly waxed on the forehead and neck, and background geometry that melts where shelves, roof lines or tiles should continue.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Real photography needs a site visit, a camera and a client who says yes. A prompt needs none of that, which is the whole reason it keeps winning.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

Real photos of real jobs, even imperfect ones. A phone photo of an actual driveway outperforms a flawless render of one, because a buyer can see the property next door and believe it. Until those photos exist we ship colour blocks and CSS patterns rather than invented ones.

15

COMMON

The bright office that belongs to nobody

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Smiling team around a laptop, glass boardroom, handshake at a desk. Generated or licensed, it makes no difference. The visitor has seen it on four other sites this week.

WHY IT HAPPENS

It is the default answer to "we need an image here" and nobody objects to it in a review.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

A photograph that could only be this business. The actual ute, the actual shopfront, the actual owner on the actual site. Recognisable local background beats studio lighting every time for a local service business.

WORDS THAT PASS A SPELLCHECK AND SAY NOTHING

Copy is where AI is hardest to hide, because the patterns survive editing.

16

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

The vocabulary

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A small set of words that almost nobody used in marketing copy before 2023 and that now appear constantly: delve, leverage, seamless, harness, unleash, robust, holistic, synergy, tapestry, elevate, empower, revolutionise, game changer, cutting edge, state of the art, world class, industry leading, next level, supercharge, unparalleled.

WHY IT HAPPENS

These words score well as filler. They sound like business writing without committing to a claim anyone could check.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

We keep a banned list and sweep every page against it before launch. The replacement is always a specific fact: "12 years" instead of "decades of experience", "brick veneer" instead of "high quality finishes".

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This was written with AI. The research, the first draft and most of the structure came out of a model, and it was then edited against the same rules it sets out here. Read it closely and you will find the traces. Anyone who works with this material daily will spot them without being told where to look.

That is the honest position rather than an embarrassing one. A model can gather the sources and produce a draft in an afternoon. It cannot decide what matters to your buyers, cut the parts that do not, or put its name to what ships. Every tell in this guide is what survives when nobody does that second part, and the difference between this page and a generated one is only ever the work that happened after the draft.

17

STRONGEST SINGLE TELL

The sentence shapes

SEEN EVERYWHERE

We don't just build pools — we craft experiences. Our team delivers quality, reliability and peace of mind, every single time.

WHAT REPLACES IT

We build concrete pools on the Northern Beaches. Most take 12 to 16 weeks from excavation to handover, and we give you the schedule before you sign.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Four habits that travel together. The "not just X, we're Y" reversal. Groups of exactly three. Em dashes several times per paragraph. A closing sentence that restates the paragraph that just ended.

WHY IT HAPPENS

These are the rhythms of the writing the models were trained on, and they survive light editing because nothing in them is technically wrong.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

No em dashes at all in client copy, which is a hard rule at this studio and the single fastest thing to check. Strip the marketing lingo that carries no information, so every sentence has to make a claim or come out. Vary sentence length deliberately, and cut any sentence that only summarises the one before it.

18

COMMON

Headlines that fit any business

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"Transform your business." "Excellence, delivered." "Your vision, our expertise." Cover the logo and you cannot name the industry, the city or the service.

WHY IT HAPPENS

A generator has no facts about the business, so it writes the only thing it can: something that is true of everyone.

WHAT WE DO INSTEAD

The headline names the service and the place. The line underneath answers what this business does, where, and why the visitor should keep reading, in one sentence. If a competitor could paste the headline onto their own site unchanged, it is not finished.

SIX DECISIONS THAT REMOVE EVERY TELL AT ONCE

None of these require abandoning AI. They require deciding things before the tool starts.

01 **Decide the visual language before any page is built**

Archetype, palette, two typefaces, motion budget, and two or three signature techniques, chosen for this trade and written down before anything is generated. Constraints are the part the brief usually leaves out, and they are the part that decides whether the output is specific or average.

02 **Take the colour from something physical**

Signage, uniform, vehicle, product, materials. It is instantly ownable, it matches what customers already see offline, and no generator will ever land on it by accident.

03 **Book the photography**

This is the highest impact line item on most builds and the one clients most often skip. Real work, real people, and the street it actually happened on. A half day on site changes a build more than any layout decision.

04 **Write with facts the business already owns**

Years trading, jobs completed, suburbs served, warranty length, response time, price band. None of it can be invented by a tool that has never visited the business, which is why it reads as real.

05 **Break one thing on purpose**

One asymmetric section, one oversized number, one full bleed photo, one hand made element. Deliberate imperfection is the clearest signal a person made decisions here.

06 **Sweep the copy before launch**

Em dash check, banned vocabulary check, rule of three check, headline swap test. Five minutes, and it catches most of what section six describes.

RUN THIS ON YOUR OWN SITE

Tick anything that is true. Print this page, or open it on a phone next to a laptop showing your homepage.

TWELVE CHECKS, ABOUT TEN MINUTES

Each one you tick is a place a visitor is being told the site was assembled rather than designed.

- ☐ The hero uses a purple, indigo or violet gradient.
- ☐ A headline somewhere has a gradient running through the letters.
- ☐ There are exactly three equal cards under the hero.
- ☐ Every card on the site shares the same radius, shadow and padding.
- ☐ The site uses one typeface for everything.
- ☐ Emoji appear as icons or bullet points.
- ☐ Feature icons could be swapped between cards without anyone noticing.
- ☐ Every section fades in on scroll.
- ☐ A testimonial has no surname, platform or date attached.
- ☐ A photo on the site shows people or work that are not actually yours.
- ☐ A page contains an em dash, or any word from the vocabulary list in section six.
- ☐ Your main headline would still make sense with a competitor's logo above it.

0 to 2: the site reads as authored. **3 to 5:** fixable in a copy and colour pass. **6 or more:** visitors are comparing you to every other generated site they have seen this month, and the fix is a rebuild of the visual language rather than a tidy up.

WHERE THE RESEARCH CAME FROM

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- Animoto, *consumer report on AI generated video*, January 2026.
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- Claude Code Playbooks, *Unslop UI*, catalogue of AI design tells and fixes. claudecodehq.com
- 925 Studios, *AI slop fonts and gradients*, 2026. 925studios.co
- Shuffle, *Why do most AI generated websites look the same*, January 2026. shuffle.dev
- Optic Flux and Taim.io, *how to spot an AI generated image in 2026*, on which visual tells still hold.
- Press Gazette, *tell tale signs of AI written copy*, on sentence level patterns.
- AMACCA Digital internal content standards, banned vocabulary list and pre publish sweep.

AMACCA. DIGITAL

The AI Tells, May 2026. Prepared for client design conversations.

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