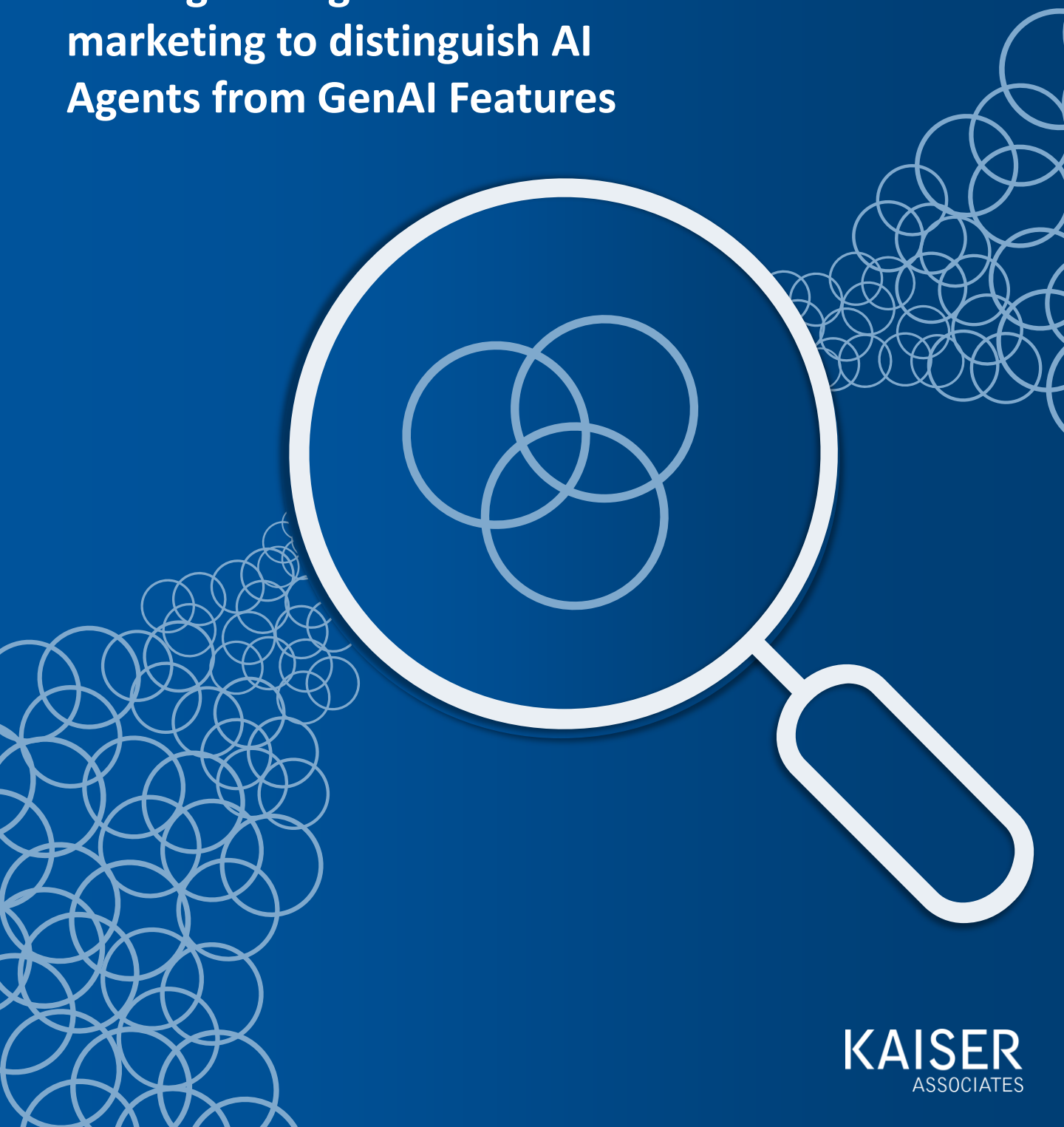
Defining AI Agents

Cutting through tech marketing to distinguish AI Agents from GenAI Features



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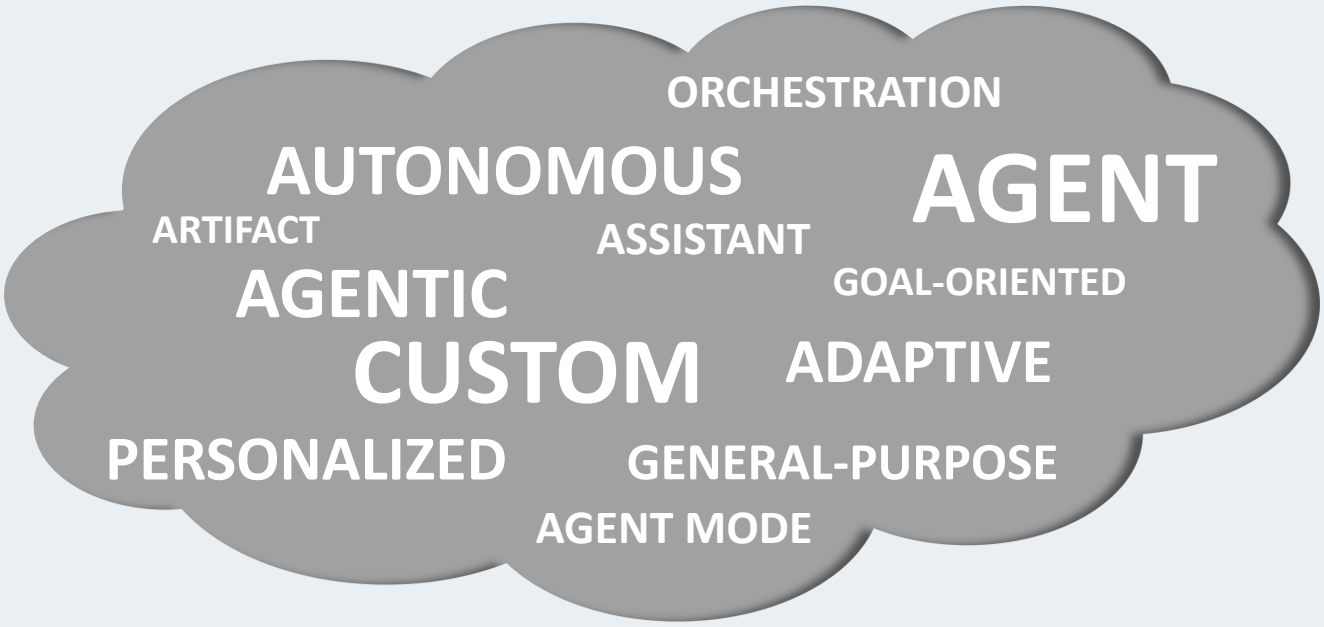
Marketing campaigns conflate AI agents with GenAI features

Articulating the value of AI agents remains a strategic challenge, as the boundary between agents and leading-edge GenAI features is increasingly fluid. Many leading GenAI interfaces now perform multi-step tasks, retrieve external data, or trigger actions, which are behaviors traditionally associated with agents. At the same time, many so-called "agents" simply respond to prompts without autonomy, resembling traditional features rather than distinct entities.

This grey zone fuels market confusion. In practice, the true distinction lies in autonomy, scope of action, data backbones, and interaction models.



Today's market often defines agents less by their technical features and more by how they are positioned and sold - a reminder that perception and packaging currently outpace capability in shaping the AI narrative.

Four technical differences distinguish AI agents from AI features

AUTONOMY & PROACTIVITY

AI Agents operate with a high level of autonomy, making independent decisions and taking multi-step actions to achieve a goal. On the other hand, AI features are user-driven tools that act only when invoked by a user.

ORCHESTRATION

AI Agents can orchestrate complex workflows by breaking tasks into subtasks and coordinating multiple components. AI features typically perform single, specific tasks without managing other processes.

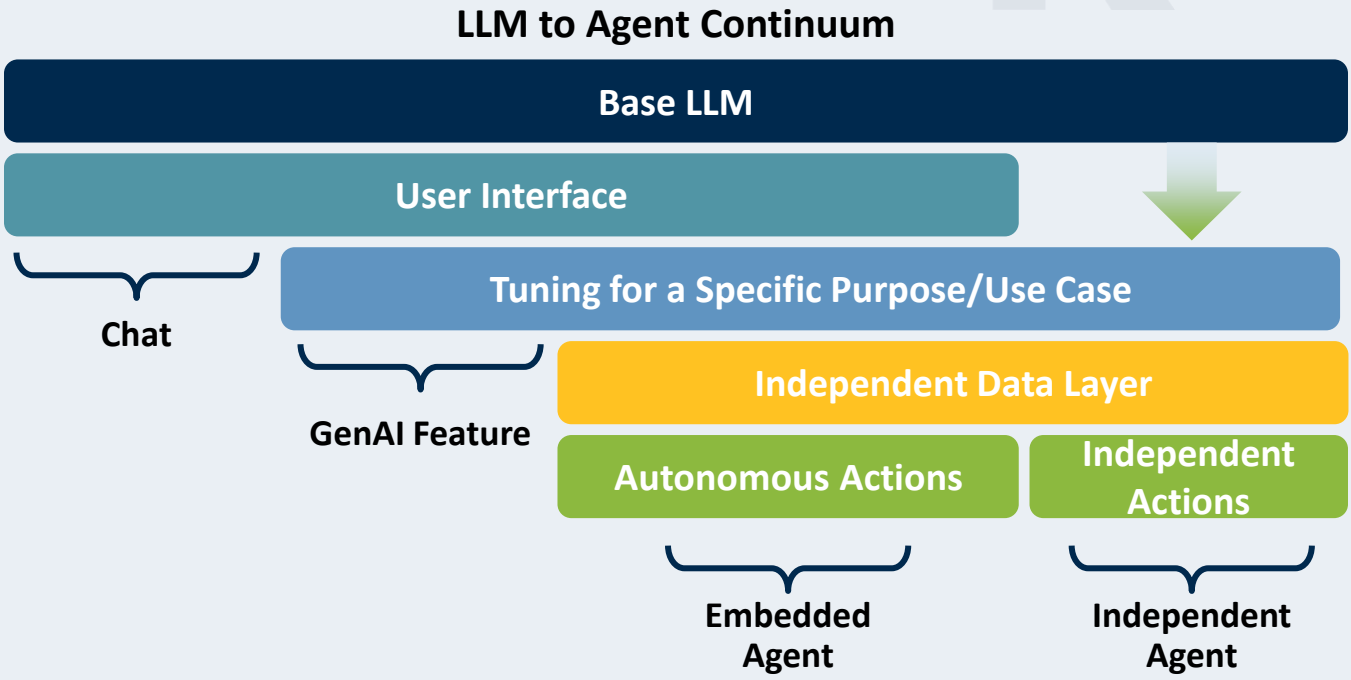
DATA RETENTION & MEMORY

AI Agents maintain their own knowledgebase including context, memory, or specialized data stores, to accomplish defined objectives. In contrast, AI features rely on the underlying LLM, pre-existing application data, or the web.

INTERACTION MODEL

AI agents are commonly defined by interaction models that support delegated tasks, multi-step flows, and autonomous actions. AI features are often embedded within familiar workflows, triggered directly by the user to perform discrete, single-turn functions.

Agents and AI features exist on the same continuum



OpenAI Chat: ChatGPT

AI Capabilities:

- ✓ Contextual Understanding
- ✓ Knowledge Retrieval
- ✓ Text & Media Generation
- ✓ Reasoning

OpenAI Feature: Deep Research

AI Capabilities:

- ✓ Discrete Task Orchestration
- ✓ Contextual Synthesis
- ✓ Structured Output
- ✓ In-Interface Execution

OpenAI Agent: Codex

AI Capabilities:

- ✓ Autonomous Action
- ✓ Continuous Learning & Stored Memory
- ✓ Feature and Agent Invocation
- ✓ HITL Feedback

Embedded agents are often invoked in the same manner as features, but independent data retention makes them unique. Independent or standalone agents are easier to identify as they can be triggered outside the bounds of a single application.

Across the market, “Agent” is inconsistently applied creating the need for deeper analysis

Microsoft — Agent or Feature?

Microsoft’s “Facilitator Agent” in Teams largely consolidates existing Copilot and legacy Teams features. Capabilities such as meeting notes capture, transcript translation, and time reminders appear to be rebranded versions of previously available functions.

Feature

Google — Chat or Agent?

Google’s “Idea Generation Agent” enables advanced brainstorming via a chat interface, which conceals the underlying orchestration of agent-driven processes. Although attached to chat, “Idea Generation” is truly an embedded agent with its own contextual data layer.

Embedded Agent

manus — Agent or Orchestrator?

Manus originally described itself as a general AI agent but now refers to itself as “Hands On AI,” a shift that avoids user confusion. Manus is a platform that coordinates embedded agents and features, much like ChatGPT or Claude and isn’t necessarily an agent itself.

Orchestrator/Platform

Claude — Agent or Feature?

Anthropic avoids agent terminology in its Claude’s interface, framing embedded agentic capabilities as features or Artifacts to emphasize utility over underlying autonomy. Artifacts do, however, often function as embedded agents with their own contextual data layer.

Embedded Agent

Distinct AI Agents & GenAI Features

Salesforce successfully differentiates AI offerings through branding: Einstein delivers embedded, in-app intelligence and generative capabilities, while Agentforce consists of autonomous AI agents for independent task execution (e.g., customer service and sales outreach), creating clear delineation between agents and features.

Market confusion has strategic impacts

Inconsistent naming conventions amplify market confusion, causing key challenges for customers including:

- Misunderstanding of technical capabilities
- Unclear product differentiation
- Difficulty understanding which tools to purchase and why
- Lack of clarity on product value given varying pricing and packaging

These challenges erode customer trust, lead to lost business, and require vendors to invest more to articulate their value. Moving forward, solution providers must clearly position distinct AI capabilities within their own portfolios and against competitor solutions. Success in these areas requires a firm understanding of customer perspectives and competitive product truth.

Ready to shape your AI Agent strategy?

Kaiser advises clients on how to develop, position, and differentiate emerging capabilities through bespoke market insights:

Market & Competitive Analysis:

Evaluating market offerings and customer perceptions forms a bedrock for strategy development

Market Positioning & Messaging Assessments:

Understanding customer needs and reactions to new value propositions paves the way for precise positioning and successful launches

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