



THE TOLL ON AI'S CHECKOUT · LANTERN LABS · OCTOBER 2026

The Real AI Winner Is Whoever Collects the Toll

Visa and Mastercard get paid when AI shops, without paying for the build

Earlier booms paid the network, not the builder. Agents handle under 1% of US e-commerce; each quarter's results show if AI repeats it.

www.lanternlabs.net

contactus@lanternlabs.net

Thematic research, not investment advice. A member of the author's household holds Mastercard shares.

An index investor already owns the \$379B AI build, while the fee on AI shopping sits with two networks that spent \$2.7B

WHAT YOU ALREADY OWN

\$379B

Capex at Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Meta and Oracle in fiscal 2025. For 2026, Amazon, Microsoft, Alphabet and Meta guide to \$720B-745B. It pays back only if AI revenue covers it.

WHAT COLLECTS WHEN AN AGENT PAYS

\$2.7B

0.7% of the build

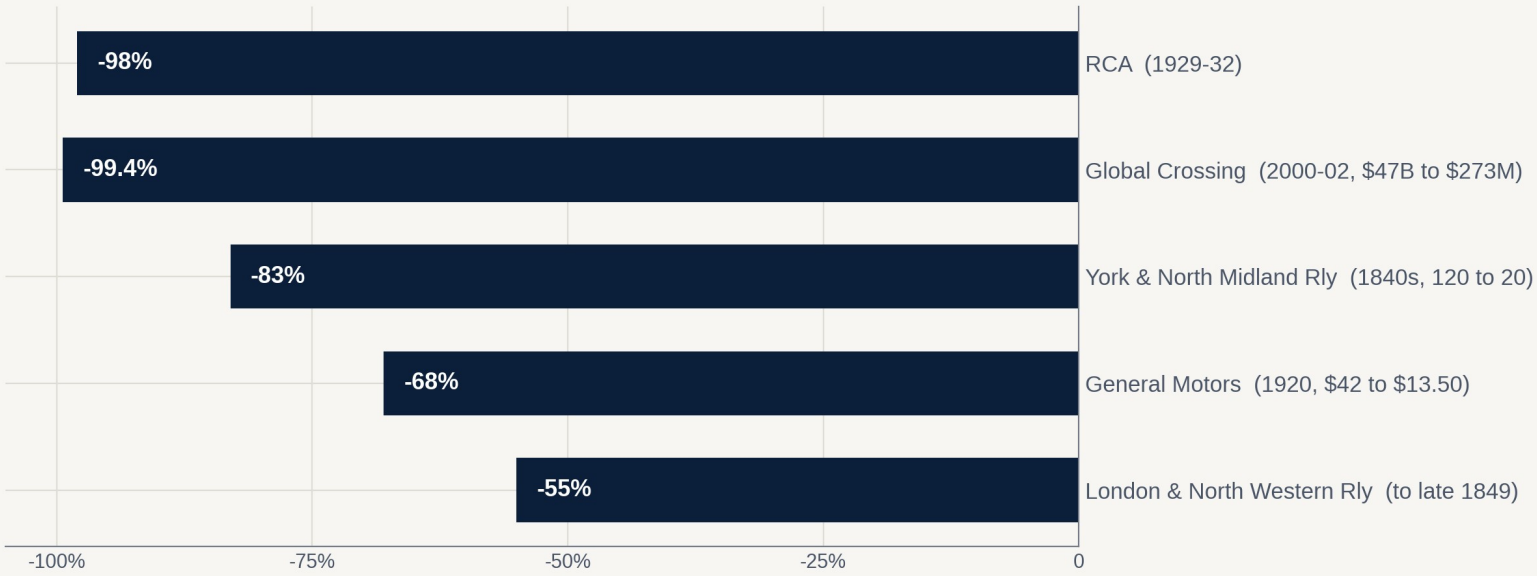
Capex at Visa and Mastercard combined. They earn a fee when an agent checks out with a card, whoever built the agent.

In earlier booms, the investors on the first line lost 55% to 99% (next slide).

Company filings, fiscal 2025 capex: Microsoft (Jun year), Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, Oracle (May year), Visa (Sep year), Mastercard ([Visa](#), [Mastercard](#), [hyperscaler filin gs](#)). [2026 guidance from July 2026 earnings calls, via Yield Theory](#). Facts are the latest reported year; Part 3 shows what today's prices imply, with no fair value or target.

In earlier booms the investors who paid for the build lost 55% to 99%, while the network that collected on use got paid

Falls from peak in five earlier booms. The figures on the right are the radio case: the builder's shareholders against the network.



-98%

RCA's shareholders, who owned the radio build, 1929-32

80%

of its tangible investment NBC earned in 1938 alone, as the network paid each time radio was used

Lantern Labs, Other People's Money (Oct 2026), Part B, citing Global Financial Data, CNN Money (2002), Odlyzko (2010), American Heritage and FCC (1941). Falls from peak share price or market value. Five illustrative cases, not proof that AI will follow them.



AI's build now leans on debt, a warning sign that came before earlier busts, so the old lesson on who gets paid still applies

On our reading, what is different this time (compute without hiring, buildings that outlast chips, scarce power) doesn't change who gets paid. The networks' case rests on Parts 1 and 2, not on the analogy.

32%

of big-tech capex funded by new debt in the year to June 2026, up from 9% (FactSet).

\$150B+

of financing suppliers have signed for their own customers, against Lucent's \$7B in 2000.

\$852B

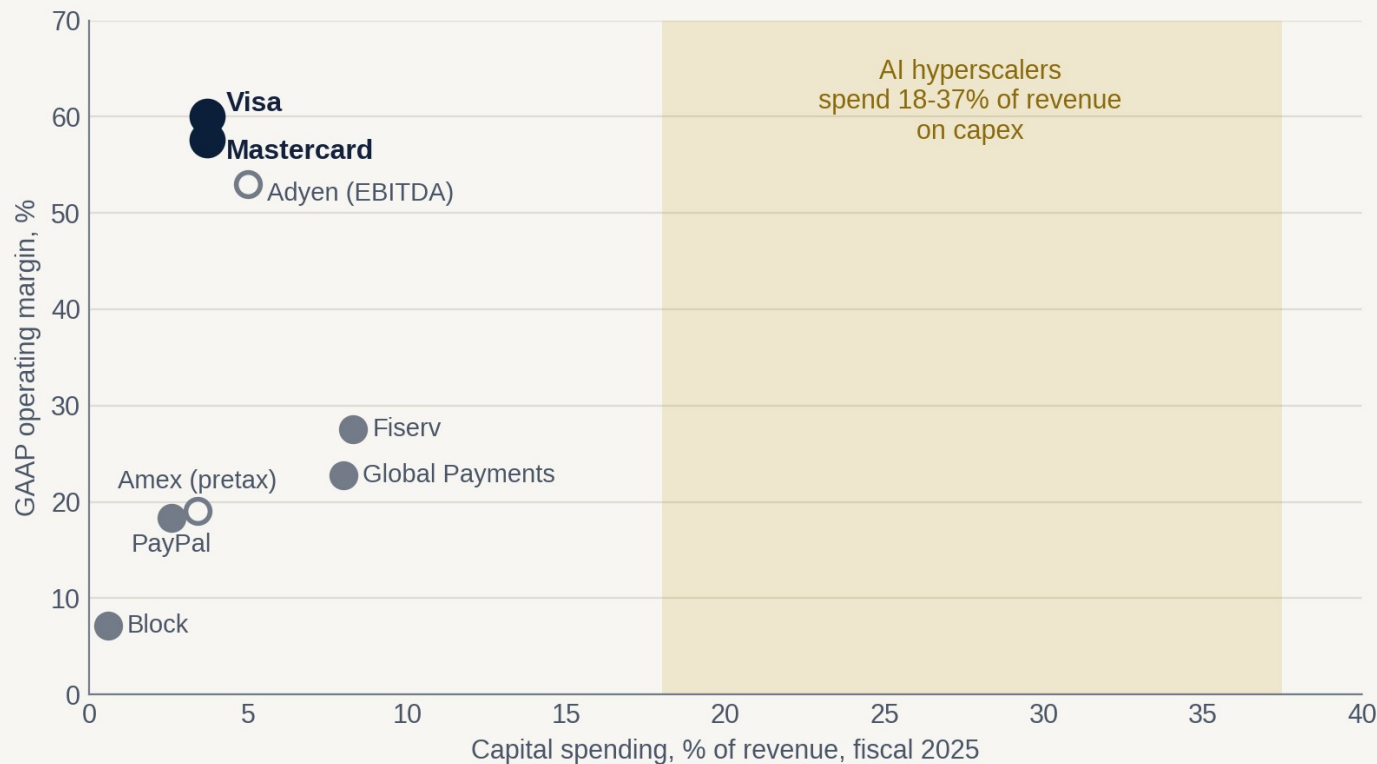
OpenAI's valuation on a ~\$50B revenue run-rate; Anthropic \$965B on ~\$67B.

99%

of operating cash flow the five largest spenders put into capex in Apr-Jun 2026.

Visa and Mastercard are AI's clean beneficiaries, as long as agents pay by card

Clean means paid when AI is used, with almost no build cost. The position is evidenced; the revenue is not yet (step 1 of 4, slide 8).



~60%

GAAP operating margin at Visa and Mastercard in fiscal 2025, on 3.7% of revenue spent on capex

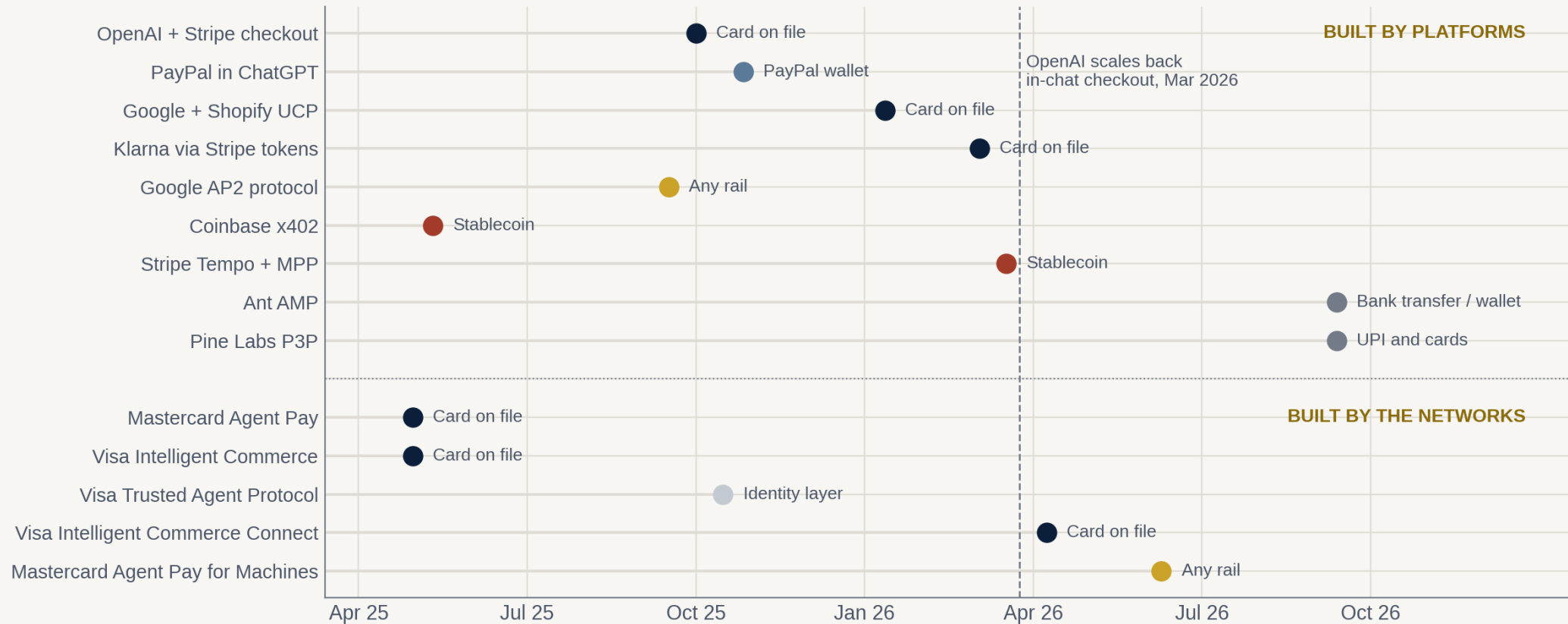
3 of 4

consumer agent checkouts built or announced by platforms (OpenAI, Google with Shopify, Klarna, PayPal) pay with a card on file

<1%

of US e-commerce mediated by agents today (Bernstein estimate), so the revenue is still ahead

Three of the four consumer agent checkouts that platforms have built or announced pay with a card on file, while stablecoin protocols serve machine payments



Company releases and launch posts, Apr 2025 to Sep 2026 ([Mastercard Agent Pay](#), [Visa Intelligent Commerce](#), [Visa Dec 2025 release](#), [Visa Trusted Agent Protocol](#), [OpenAI](#), [PayPal newsroom](#), [Google AP2](#), [Klarna](#), [Coinbase x402](#), [Mastercard-BVNB](#), [Mastercard Agent Pay for Machines](#), [Shopify](#), [Stellagent](#)). 'Any rail' = card, bank transfer or stablecoin by design. Shopify's Agentic Storefronts (Mar 2026) run on each merchant's own checkout and are not shown. Klarna's is announced, not live; PayPal routes through its wallet. [OpenAI scale-back per TechCrunch](#).

An agent buying for someone needs a known buyer and a way to undo mistakes, and in the US the card offers both most widely

What the purchase needs	Card token	Stablecoin	US bank transfer
Who is paying, and which agent	Issuer-verified cardholder; agent tokens and Visa's Trusted Agent Protocol	Wallet address; identity checks vary by provider	Bank-verified account holder
A limit on what the agent can spend	Token scoped to a merchant, amount or time	Possible in code; few retail tools	Few consumer tools
A way to undo a wrong purchase	Chargeback rights under network rules	Payments are final	No card-style chargeback for the shopper
Acceptance at checkout	Near-universal online	A handful of merchants	Pay-by-bank: 1.5% of US consumer transactions
Cost to the merchant	Highest of the three	Lowest	Low

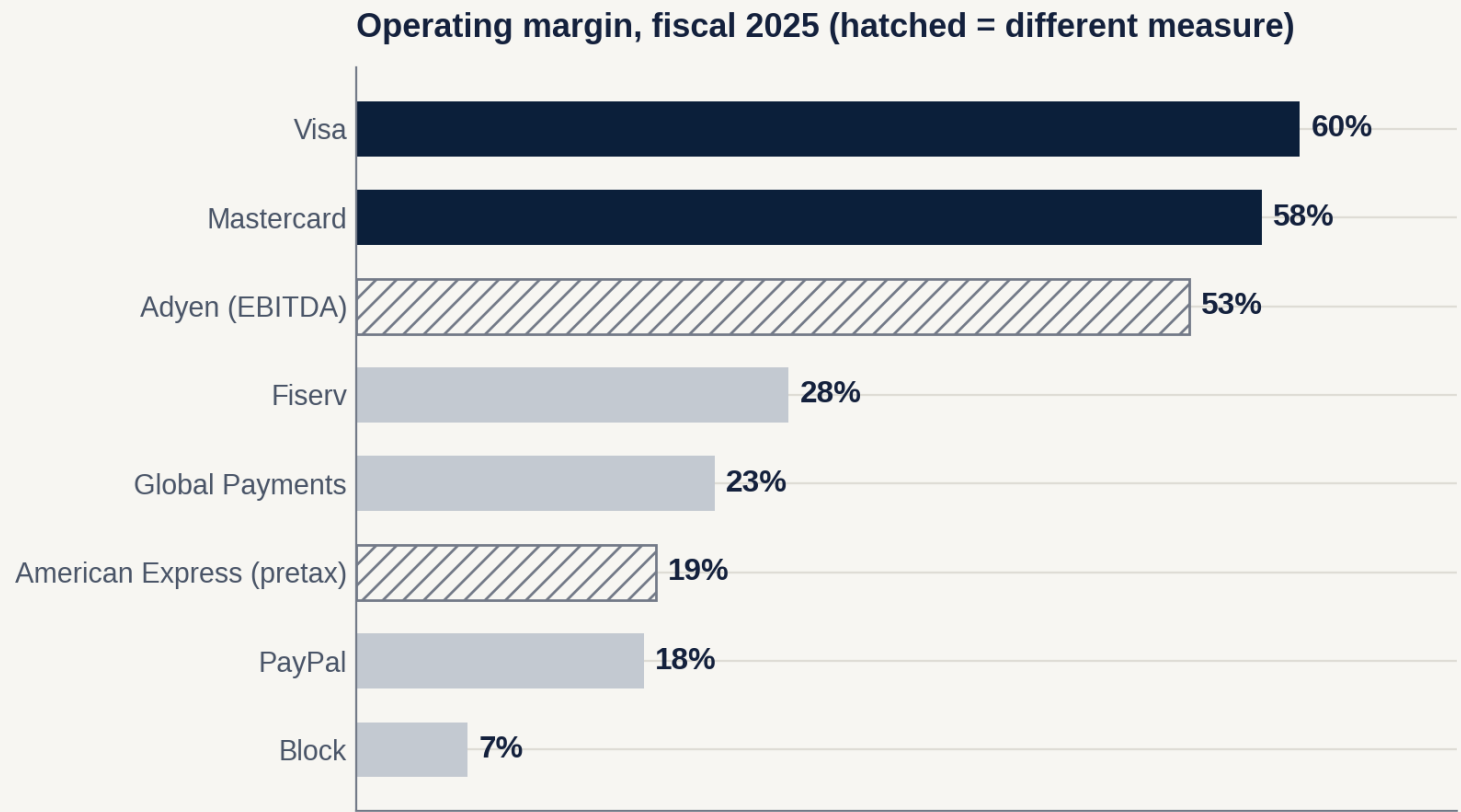
Lantern assessment from network rules and product documentation ([Visa Dec 2025 release](#), [Visa Trusted Agent Protocol](#), [Google AP2](#)); US pay-by-bank share: [PYMN TS/Trustly, Apr 2026](#). The cost row is why a cheaper rail could still win; see Part 4.

The agent case climbs four steps, and today's evidence clears only the first

The rest of the deck rests on step 1 and argues about steps 2 to 4. Step 4 would show first in Visa's and Mastercard's quarterly results.

Step	What it would show	Evidence today	Status
1. Agents can pay	A card credential works inside agent checkouts	Three of four consumer agent checkouts that platforms have built or announced pass a card on file. Visa's 17.5B tokens show the plumbing exists; they are not agent transactions	Known
2. Agents complete purchases	Shoppers let an agent finish the buy	Visa reported 'hundreds' of agent transactions by Dec 2025; 9% of consumers would let an agent start and finish a purchase (Accenture, Jan 2026 survey); 3% of transactions involve an agent (Checkout.com survey)	Early, mostly surveys
3. Purchases scale	Agents reach 1% or more of US e-commerce	Under 1% of e-commerce (Bernstein estimate); x402 has moved \$19M in total; OpenAI scaled back in-chat checkout in Mar 2026. AI traffic rose 693%, but traffic is not purchases	Not yet
4. Networks capture it	Visa or Mastercard reports agent volume, or revenue at today's take rate or better	Neither Visa nor Mastercard discloses agent volume or revenue. Value-added services growth (+34%, +18%) mostly comes from products unrelated to agents	Unknown

Visa and Mastercard keep about 60 cents of operating profit per revenue dollar on 3.7% capex, against 7 to 28 cents at the processors and wallets



59-60%

GAAP operating margins at both networks in the latest quarter (Visa 59.1% after \$563M severance; Mastercard 60.2%)

3.7%

of revenue spent on capex by the networks in fiscal 2025, against 18% to 37% at the five hyperscalers; 5.3% of Visa's operating profit went to capex over 2019-25

Filed FY2025 GAAP operating income over net revenue ([Visa](#), [Mastercard](#), [American Express](#), [PayPal](#), [Fiserv](#), [Global Payments](#), [Block](#), [Adyen](#)). Like-for-like bars are solid; American Express (pretax) and Adyen (EBITDA) use different measures and are hatched. Visa's 60.0% is after a \$2.56B litigation provision; Mastercard's adjusted margin was 59.2%. Capex from filed cash-flow statements ([Visa](#), [Mastercard](#), [hyperscaler filings](#)).



On an illustrative \$100 online card purchase the merchant pays about \$2.56, of which network assessments are roughly 14 to 17 cents

A bypass takes most of the \$2.56 from the card issuer. A cheap way to move money is not a complete payment service with fraud checks and disputes.

Illustrative \$100 US online purchase	Visa or Mastercard credit card	Stablecoin through Stripe	US instant bank transfer
Merchant pays	~\$2.56 (2.31% + \$0.25 typical online rate)	\$1.50 (1.5%)	Provider fee, not published
Card issuer receives	~\$2.36 at the 2.36% average Visa and Mastercard credit interchange	\$0	\$0
Network fees on this purchase (estimate)	~\$0.14-0.17 in assessments, plus small per-item fees	\$0 unless a card sits in front or Visa settles it	\$0 on FedNow
Company-wide proxy, not a fee	Visa net revenue / payments volume = 0.29%. Higher than the fee above because it includes cross-border, processing and services revenue	n/a	n/a
Cost of moving the money	Inside the fees above	~\$0.0002 on the Base chain	\$0.045 per FedNow payment, paid by the sending bank
Who absorbs a wrong purchase	Issuer and merchant, through a chargeback	Merchant, or no one	No card-style chargeback
What a network can still sell	Tokens, fraud scoring, dispute handling	Settlement and card-linked stablecoin programmes; Mastercard bought BVNK	Identity and fraud tools; no revenue disclosed

[Helcim 2026 rates and Merchant Payments Coalition interchange via The Motley Fool](#); [Stripe fee via Yahoo Finance](#); [FedNow fee schedule](#); 0.29% is Lantern arithmetic. Illustrative only: separate published averages, not one reconciled transaction; actual costs vary by card, merchant, processor and transaction type.





PART 3

Prices already reward the networks as clean beneficiaries, but not yet for agents

Our test: a theme should show up in the share prices of the companies it is meant to help. Both networks hit record prices in October 2026 while most payment middlemen fell. What today's prices imply needs no agent volume at all.



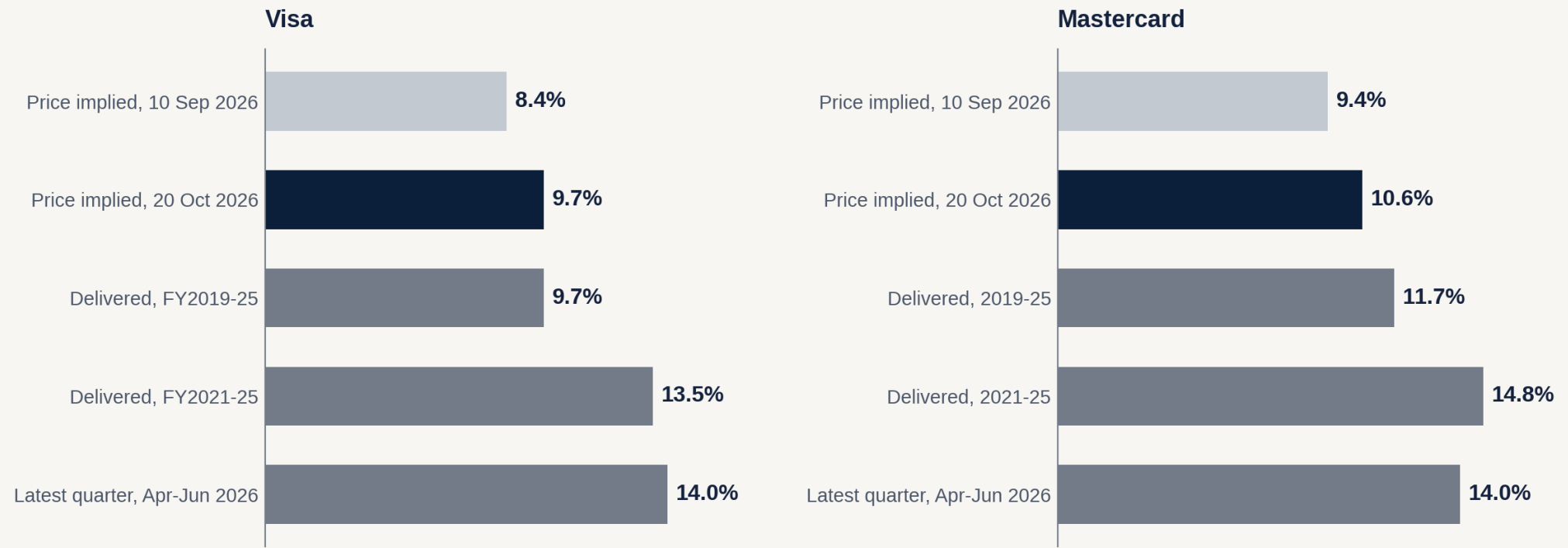
Visa and Mastercard combine double-digit growth, ~60% margins and record prices, a mix no processor or wallet has

Company	Where it sits	Latest revenue growth	FY25 margin	FY25 capex % rev	2-yr return
Visa	Network	+14% (Apr-Jun 26)	60.0%	3.7%	+50%
Mastercard	Network	+14% (Apr-Jun 26)	57.6%	3.7%	+28%
American Express	Network and issuer	+10% (Apr-Jun 26)	19.1% pretax	3.4%	+21%
Adyen	Processor	+19% (H1 26)	53% EBITDA	5%	-34%
Block	Processor and wallet	+9% (Apr-Jun 26)	7.1%	0.6%	+17%
PayPal	Wallet and processor	+5% (Apr-Jun 26)	18.3%	2.6%	-26%
Global Payments	Processor	~+4% excl. Worldpay deal	~22.8%	~8%	-15%
Fiserv	Processor and bank tech	-4% (Apr-Jun 26)	27.5%	8.3%	-73%

Filed results ([Visa](#), [Mastercard](#), [American Express](#), [PayPal](#), [Fiserv](#), [Global Payments](#), [Block](#), [Adyen](#)); prices Yahoo Finance adjusted, 30 Sep 2024 to 20 Oct 2026.
GAAP operating margin unless noted. Facts only; the deck sets no fair value or target. American Express reports 23 Oct.

Visa's price now implies 9.7% a year of revenue growth for a decade, up from 8.4% in September and below the 13.5% of fiscal 2021-25

A higher implied rate means the price asks more of Visa, still less than it delivered in 2021-25. About two-thirds of Visa's value in this model sits beyond year ten, so these rates lean on the terminal assumptions. The bridge and sensitivities are in the companion method appendix.



One extra point of lasting revenue growth is worth about \$63B to Visa and \$46B to Mastercard, roughly 8% of each

The implied 9.7% and 10.6% need no agent volume, so agents would be the extra point.

\$63B

Visa: value of one more point of annual revenue growth for ten years, 8.2% of its ~\$770B market value. Lantern reverse-DCF.

\$46B

Mastercard: the same point, 8.3% of its ~\$549B market value.

~\$150B

of extra Visa volume that point means in year one, illustrative only: it assumes new agent volume earns the 0.29% company-wide average, which is not a marginal rate.

\$190-385B

Morgan Stanley's range for US agentic commerce by 2030 (Dec 2025). A forecast, not a measurement.



PART 4

Cheaper rails and policy could take the toll away, and both have dates

In the US the card is the merchant's most expensive rail, and an agent has no habit of carrying one. Where a free bank rail exists, it has already won. Merchants have spent twenty years in court and Congress trying to cut card fees; the next rulings fall between November and February.



Agents will pick the cheapest rail that works, and a platform that owns the agent can make bank transfer work

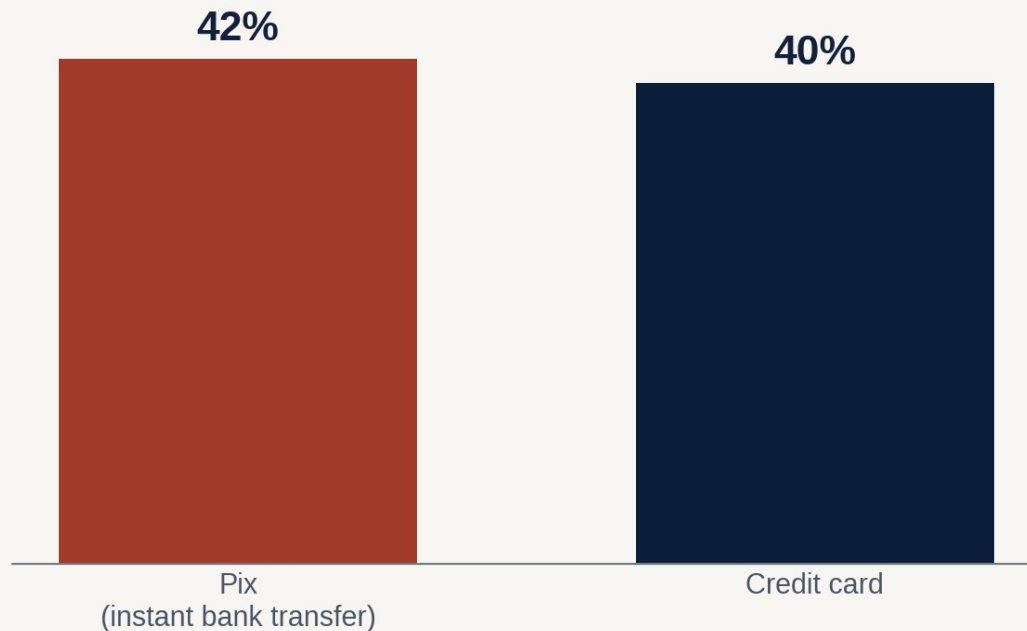
The case against us, at full strength	What would settle it
Cards win at checkout because people carry them and merchants accept them. An agent from OpenAI or Google has no card habit and pays however its platform tells it to.	Which rail OpenAI, Google and Amazon default to when a US merchant offers pay-by-bank at a discount
A US merchant pays about \$2.56 per \$100 on a card, far more than a bank transfer costs. The settlement up for approval on 16 Nov lets merchants refuse premium cards and surcharge, and they will pay platforms to steer agents away from cards.	Merchant use of the settlement's opt-outs after final approval; surcharge notices in agent checkouts
In Brazil, Pix took 42% of online sales from cards within five years of its 2020 launch.	Any US move toward a mandated consumer instant rail; FedNow consumer volume
Visa and Mastercard's refund advantage can be rebuilt. Agent platforms can offer their own purchase guarantee, as Amazon and PayPal do today.	An agent platform offering a buyer guarantee on non-card payments

Stated as its proponents would state it. [Lantern judgment, drawing on Worldpay GPR 2026, the settlement terms](#) and the launch record in Part 1.

Pix, Brazil's free instant bank rail, took 42% of online sales by value in 2025, passing the credit card

Pix launched in Nov 2020 under a Banco Central do Brasil mandate; FedNow, live since Jul 2023, has no such mandate.

Share of Brazil's online sales by value, 2025



24.1B

UPI transactions in India in September 2026, up 23% by volume

5.0M

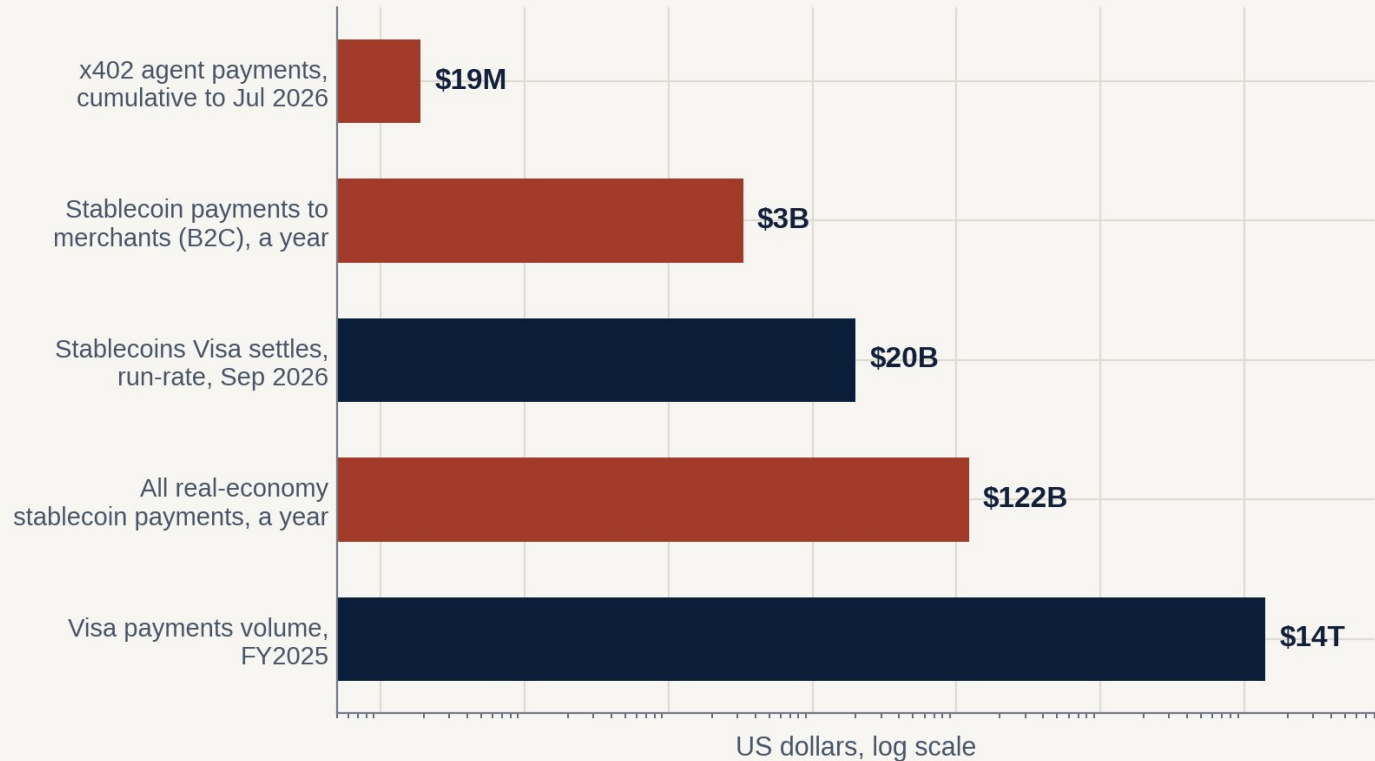
FedNow payments in Apr-Jun 2026, against Visa's 71.7B transactions in the same quarter

1.5%

of US consumer transactions paid by bank transfer

If stablecoins took all of Morgan Stanley's top-end agent-commerce forecast, Visa would have about \$1.1B of revenue at stake

x402's average payment is about \$0.14 on Visa and Artemis figures. Stablecoins win at sub-dollar payments between machines.



\$3B

a year of stablecoin payments to merchants, against \$14 trillion of Visa payments volume. The \$1.1B applies the 0.29% company-wide average to the \$385B top end: an illustrative upper bound, 2.8% of fiscal 2025 revenue

Nov 2026

the OCC's promised final rule under the GENIUS Act, which sets who may issue a US payment stablecoin

Artemis via PaymentExpert, Aug 2025 run-rate; The Defiant citing Visa/Artemis, Jul 2026; The Block, 8 Sep 2026; Visa FY2025 8-K. Log scale: each gridline is ten times the one before.



Four legal and policy deadlines fall between 16 November and 17 February, starting with the merchant settlement hearing

Only the Credit Card Competition Act and DOJ's debit case reach the networks' own fees; the others mainly cut what card issuers earn.



We put 40% on agents paying by card with the networks reporting it, against 30% on agents staying too small to matter

Path to end-2027	Weight	Why this weight	What would raise it
The toll forms: agent checkouts on card tokens grow and a network discloses agent volume	40%	Step 1 is evidenced and Visa targets 'millions' of agent shoppers this holiday. Under half because steps 2 to 4 have no data yet.	A disclosed count above 1% of e-commerce; Visa's holiday claim met
Agents stay small: traffic grows, purchases don't, and the networks stay a spending story	30%	Only 9% of consumers would let an agent finish a purchase (Accenture, Jan 2026 survey), and OpenAI pulled back in-chat checkout in March.	Bernstein's share still under 1% at end-2027; more retreats from in-chat checkout
Policy trims the toll: the Competition Act passes, or merchants use the settlement to refuse premium cards	20%	The Act failed to attach twice in 2026 and has had no floor vote; an appeal likely holds the settlement into 2027. Severe if it lands, so not lower.	A floor vote before 3 Jan 2027; a formal EU case on scheme fees
Agents route around the card: a large platform defaults US shoppers to bank pay or stablecoins	10%	No US platform does this today; FedNow carried 5M payments in Apr-Jun 2026; Pix needed a central-bank mandate.	OpenAI, Google or Amazon making bank pay the default; B2C stablecoins above \$25B a year

Seven readings will move these weights, and most arrive with each quarter's results

Visa and Mastercard are AI's clean beneficiaries, as long as agents pay by card.

Question	Signal	Decision threshold (ours, not a statistical breakpoint) and why	When it shows up
Are agents paying yet?	Agent volume in Visa and Mastercard results	Any figure; above 1% of e-commerce means agents have left the rounding error (step 3)	Each quarter's results
Is the agent line growing?	Disclosed agent revenue or adoption; failing that, value-added services (indirect)	Indirect only, since most VAS is unrelated to agents: slowing to net revenue growth flags the services line, not agent demand	Each quarter's results
Is the core intact?	Visa US payments volume growth	Below 7% for two quarters: the implied 9.7% would then need pricing or services to carry it	Each quarter's results
Does the settlement stand?	MDL 1720 final approval	Approval plus wide premium-card refusals: the first sign of merchants steering off cards	Court approval, then merchant opt-outs
Does Congress act?	Credit Card Competition Act	A floor vote, which the Act has not had this Congress, or attachment to a must-pass bill	Floor votes and must-pass bills
Did agents shop this holiday?	Adobe holiday report; Visa's 'millions' claim	Agent-completed purchases reported, not just traffic (step 2)	Adobe's report each January
Does price still confirm?	Visa and Mastercard against the S&P 500	Trailing the index by 15 points over 12 months fails our price-confirmation test for a beneficiary	Monthly

Lantern dashboard. Thresholds are ours. Timing from company investor relations, court dockets and Adobe's publication pattern ([Visa](#), [Mastercard](#), [Adobe](#), [MDL 1720 via Payments Dive](#), [Credit Card Competition Act via PYMNTS](#)).

Visa and Mastercard are AI's clean beneficiaries, as long as agents pay by card

WHAT YOU ALREADY OWN

\$379B



WHAT COLLECTS WHEN AN AGENT PAYS

\$2.7B

0.7% of the build

In several earlier booms the investors who funded the build lost 55% to 99%, while the network paid on use kept earning. AI may take a different path.

Until an agent platform defaults US shoppers to a bank transfer, or Congress puts a second network on every credit card, we'd count AI commerce as card volume. Agents handle under 1% of US e-commerce today. Each quarter's results show whether that rises above 1%, and on which rail.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE ESTABLISHES

Agent checkouts pay with card credentials (step 1).

The networks spend 3.7% of revenue on capex at ~60% GAAP margins.

WHAT IT DOESN'T, YET

Whether agents complete purchases at scale (steps 2 and 3).

Whether network revenue rises with them (step 4).

The dashboard says when each gets tested (slide 21).

You can check now whether your portfolio holds the fee on AI shopping or only the build

Check	How	What it tells you
Split your payments holdings into networks and the rest	Custodian holdings by issuer: Visa and Mastercard on one side; PayPal, Fiserv, Global Payments, FIS, Adyen and Block on the other	Whether your 'payments' exposure is the side that returned +28% to +50% over two years, or the side that ran from -73% to +17% (slide 12)
Ask each manager who funds compute and who collects fees in their AI holdings	One question at the next review call	How much of your AI exposure depends on the \$379B build paying back
Add the signals to your quarterly review	Agent volume against the 1% line, Visa US payments volume against 7% growth, and court or Congress action on card fees	The first evidence on steps 2 to 4 of the ladder (slide 8) and on the policy path
Re-read the dashboard after each round of results	Signal, threshold and next reading for each (slide 21)	Which of the four path weights has moved, and in which direction

These checks inform a decision and imply no buy, sell or sizing call. Returns per slide 12; [Yahoo Finance adjusted closes](#).



IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES

Decision Intelligence, not Decision Making. This deck is thematic research prepared by Lantern Labs for information only. It is not a recommendation, offer or solicitation to buy, sell or hold any security, and it is not personalised investment, legal or tax advice. It sets no fair value or price target; the expectations slides in Part 3 show what current prices imply under stated assumptions, which a reader may reasonably dispute. Companies are named as participants in a theme; none has been through Lantern's company-level analysis for this deck, which is available on request.

Path weights and other assessments are analytical judgments that may prove wrong. The deck draws on public information believed reliable but not independently verified or guaranteed. Company and third-party figures are reproduced as reported. Figures are as of 20 October 2026 and will change as the networks report each quarter.

Interest disclosure. A member of the household of Lantern Labs' founder holds shares of Mastercard.

Sources are cited at the foot of each slide, and underlined sources are live links in the PDF. Margins use filed GAAP figures rather than aggregator data, which strips Visa's fiscal 2025 litigation provision and overstates its margin by about 700bp. Prices are adjusted closes.

Lantern Labs · www.lanternlabs.net · contactus@lanternlabs.net

