LIAISON MARKETING

WHITE PAPER — NOVEMBER 2026



HOW TO RANK FIRST IN

AI *answers*

The Shortlist Is Borrowed

How ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity choose the firms they name, and ten actionable insights for partners, CEOs and their marketing teams.

Clem Assingo, Director • **Valentin Toussaint**, Growth Director • Brazil and Spain

FOR PARTNERS, CEOS AND THEIR MARKETING TEAMS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

More buyers now ask ChatGPT, Gemini or Perplexity which firm to hire. We wanted to know how the assistants choose, and what a firm can do to be named. We asked them ourselves, then read the 2025 and 2026 research and what Google, Microsoft, OpenAI and Perplexity say about their own systems. The short answer: an assistant borrows its shortlist. It names the firms that search finds and that others write about. Each of the ten insights says what the research shows, what it means for your firm, and one idea to try on Monday. We see what a buyer can see, not what happens inside your firm, so each idea is a suggestion to weigh against what you know.

THE WORK BEHIND THIS PAPER

3
assistants asked the same question, 11 November 2026

10
firms named, and every firm site and listing they cited opened

12
studies from 2025 and 2026, read at the source

3
research papers, one accepted at NeurIPS

7
pages of documentation by Google, Microsoft, OpenAI and Perplexity

3
talks and one lawyers' forum thread, read in full

2
free reports that show AI visibility, by Google and Bing

30
sources, each one dated, and linked where public

THE TEN IN ONE PAGE

Ten insights.
Ten ideas for Monday.



01 Named in 69 First in 25

There is no fixed number one. Ask twice and the list changes, so count how often you are named. 06



02 2.9%

Each assistant names different firms. Three assistants agreed on 2.9% of the firms they named. 08



03 Hundreds

To be named by AI, first be found in search. Google's AI takes its pages from Google's own index. 10



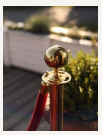
04 15.2%

AI repeats what others write about you. A brand's own pages are 15.2% of what AI cites. 12



05 42%

AI takes its names from Google and the directories. For law firms, google.com supplied 42% of AI citations. 14



06 4.3 stars

Good reviews get you on the list, not to the top. Ratings work as a filter. 16



07 44.2%

AI quotes the top of the page. 44.2% of ChatGPT's citations came from the first 30% of a page. 18



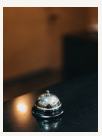
08 3 of 54

Shortcuts to AI answers rarely work. 3 of 54 rewriting tests lifted a page beyond chance. 20



09 3%

Each language and each city has its own list. Regional companies were named in 3% of the searches they fit. 22



10 1.08%

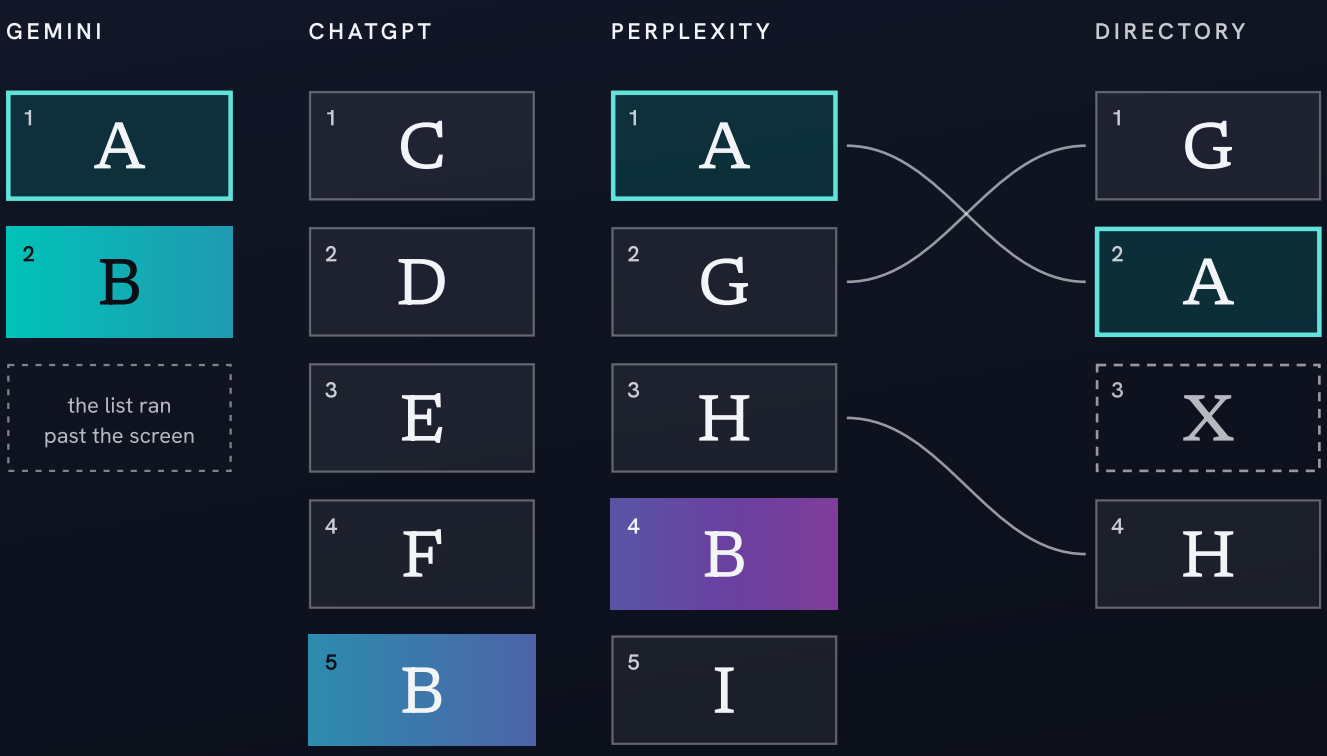
AI sends few visits, but many people ask it first. 1.08% of visits, yet 46% of US adults would consult AI before a lawyer. 24

One question, three assistants, three lists

On 11 November 2026, in incognito windows, we asked Gemini, ChatGPT and Perplexity the question a future client asks. Then we asked each one why it ranked those firms first, and which pages it used.

ASKED IN INCOGNITO WINDOWS

Who is the best bilingual immigration lawyer in Argentina?



B, the only firm all three named

A, first on two of the three

X, on none of the lists we captured

Perplexity's first three are all in the directory's first four. The lines join the same firm.

WHAT IT MEANS

The three assistants named ten firms between them, and no two lists matched. Only one firm, B, was on all three. Perplexity followed a legal directory's Buenos Aires page: its top three are all in the directory's top four. ChatGPT backed its first two with the firms' own websites and their Justia profiles. Asked why, each assistant described a judgement, not a measurement. The ten insights explain why the lists differ, and what a firm can do about it.

ASKED WHY, EACH ASSISTANT ANSWERED

> *"it was a heuristic shortlist based on the order and content of search results, not an independent audit of credentials, case outcomes, bar discipline, or client results."*
>
> PERPLEXITY

> *"I presented it as my strongest candidate based on its apparent specialization and advertised experience. That is not the same as proving that it is better than the other firms."*
>
> CHATGPT

> *"the positioning relies on reputation, demonstrable specialization, client profile alignment, and transparency of credentials."*
>
> GEMINI

How we know. One run of each assistant, in English, on 11 November 2026, captured on screen. Gemini's list ran past the screen after its first two names. We opened every firm site and listing the assistants cited the same day, along with the directory's page. Firms are shown as letters; X is on none of the lists we captured. One run is a snapshot, not a ranking: see insight 1. Full sources, page 28.



Named in 69 First in 25

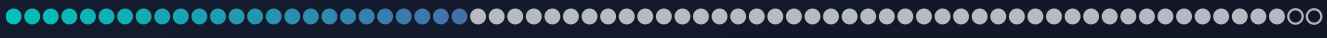
of 71 ChatGPT answers to the same question, for City of Hope, a cancer hospital in Los Angeles. Almost always on the list, rarely at the top.

There is no fixed number one

WHAT WE FOUND

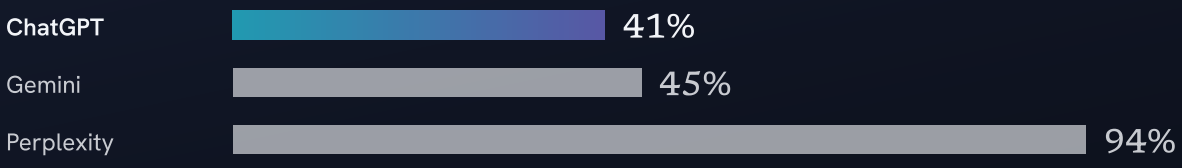
SparkToro and Gumshoe had 600 volunteers put the same 12 recommendation questions to ChatGPT, Claude and Google's AI, 2,961 times in all. ChatGPT and Google's AI had less than a 1 in 100 chance of giving the same list twice. What stayed steady was who appeared: City of Hope was named in 69 of 71 ChatGPT answers, but first in only 25.

71 CHATGPT ANSWERS TO ONE QUESTION, ONE DOT EACH, GROUPED



Named first: 25 Named lower down: 44 Not named: 2

SAME QUESTION, ASKED TWICE IN ONE DAY: SHARE OF THE CITED SITES THAT CAME BACK



SparkToro and Gumshoe, runs from November and December 2025. Muck Rack, 1,020 prompts, September 2026.

How we know. SparkToro with Gumshoe, 27 January 2026: runs collected in November and December 2025; Gumshoe sells AI visibility tracking. Rand Fishkin's video on the study, 12 March 2026. Muck Rack, 28 October 2026: 1,020 prompts run in September 2026. Full sources, page 28.

WHAT IT MEANS

> One answer is one draw, and the next one may differ. So the useful question is not where your firm ranks, but how often it is named. The study's authors call that share of answers "a reasonable metric", and say "any tool that gives a 'ranking position in AI' is full of baloney".

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea worth testing: take the three questions your clients most often ask before they call. Put each one to the assistants every working day for a month, signed out, and count how often your firm is named, not where. A month gives a first count, not a verdict: Rand Fishkin says a truly representative measure needs 100 or more runs of a prompt. If a tool runs the checks for you, ask it for the share.



2.9%

of the 19,692 law firms named by ChatGPT, Claude and Google's AI Mode, for the same 3,200 questions, were named by all three.

Each assistant names different firms

WHAT WE FOUND

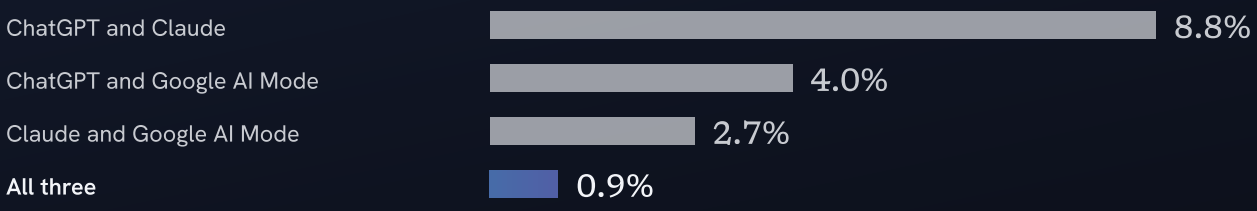
Custom Legal Marketing asked the three assistants to recommend a lawyer for 32 practice areas in 100 US cities: 3,200 questions, once each, on 28 and 29 July 2026. Together they named 19,692 different firms. Only 578 of them were named by all three. On the first name, the three agreed 0.9% of the time.

THE 19,692 LAW FIRMS NAMED FOR 3,200 QUESTIONS, DRAWN TO SCALE



- **Named by all three: 578, or 2.9%**
- Named by Google AI Mode alone: 9,778
- The other 9,336: named by ChatGPT or Claude alone, or by two of the three

SAME FIRM NAMED FIRST: SHARE OF THE 2,566 QUESTIONS ALL THREE ANSWERED



How we know. Custom Legal Marketing, a law firm marketing agency, 29 July 2026: US only; Gemini and Perplexity not tested; each question was run once per assistant, so part of the gap may be run-to-run variation, as the authors note; the 0.9% covers the 2,566 questions where all three named a firm. The documentation of Google, Microsoft, Perplexity and OpenAI, read 11 November 2026. Full sources, page 28.

WHAT IT MEANS

> The reason is simple: they do not search the same web. Google's AI reads Google's index, Microsoft's Copilot reads Bing's, Perplexity keeps its own, and ChatGPT search "sometimes partners with other search providers". A firm can come first on one assistant and be absent from the next. So each assistant needs its own check.

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: ask each new client which assistant they used before they called, if any. After a few months, the answers show which assistant matters most for your firm, and where to start the work in this paper.



Hundreds

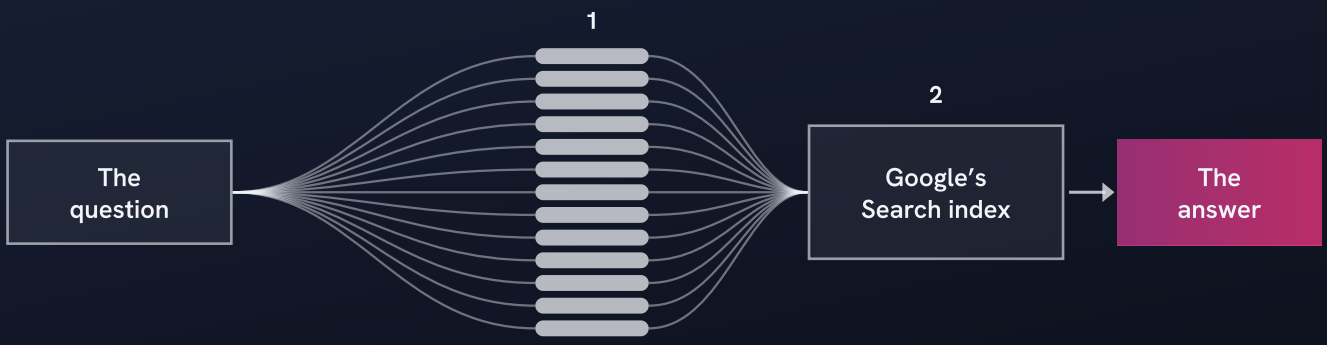
of searches that Google's Deep Search, in AI Mode, can run for one question. Each one is a chance for your page to be found, or missed.

To be named by AI, first be found in search

WHAT WE FOUND

Google says its AI features work by "relying on our core Search ranking systems to retrieve relevant, up-to-date web pages from our Search index". For one question, AI Mode runs many searches at once, and Deep Search "can issue hundreds of searches". The answer is then written from the pages those searches return.

HOW GOOGLE DESCRIBES THE WORK BEHIND AN AI MODE ANSWER



1 AI Mode issues "a multitude of queries simultaneously". Deep Search "can issue hundreds of searches".

2 The pages come from Google's Search index, through its "core Search ranking systems".

A diagram of the process Google describes, not to scale.

How we know. Google Search Central, AI optimization guide, updated 10 July 2026. Google, AI Mode announcement, 20 May 2025. C-SEO Bench, Puerto and others, version 3, 20 October 2025: page position was set by hand, as a stand-in for search rank. The SEO Works, a UK agency, 7 September 2026: 95 websites, September 2025 to August 2026. Bing, 10 February 2026, public preview. Full sources, page 28.

WHAT IT MEANS

> The work that gets a page found in search is the work that gets it named by AI. Researchers saw the same: in the C-SEO Bench study, moving a page higher among those the model read gave "far greater citation ranking gains" than any rewrite of the page. Across 95 websites, The SEO Works found that the sites gaining AI visits were those whose organic search was improving.

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: Bing Webmaster Tools now shows, for free, a sample of the phrases "the AI used when retrieving content" before it cited your site in Copilot. Check where your pages rank in ordinary search for each phrase. The phrases where you rank low point to the pages to improve first.



15.2%

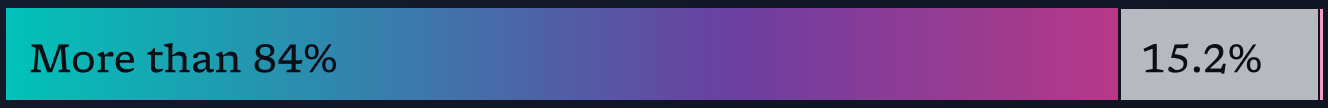
of the sources AI answers cite are a brand's own pages. More than 84% are pages published by others.

AI repeats what others write about you

WHAT WE FOUND

Muck Rack ran 1,020 prompts across ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Perplexity in September 2026, on top of more than 40 million AI responses from 2026. A brand's own pages made up 15.2% of what the answers cited, and paid and advertorial content 0.3%. "More than 84% of AI citations still come from earned and third-party sources, including journalism, Wikipedia and other encyclopedic sites, government and NGO sources, academic research and third-party corporate content."

WHAT AI ANSWERS CITE, BY WHO PUBLISHED THE PAGE



Earned and third party

Journalism, Wikipedia and other encyclopedic sites, government and NGO sources, academic research, and other companies' content

The brand's own pages

Paid: 0.3%

Muck Rack, 1,020 prompts across ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Perplexity, September 2026.

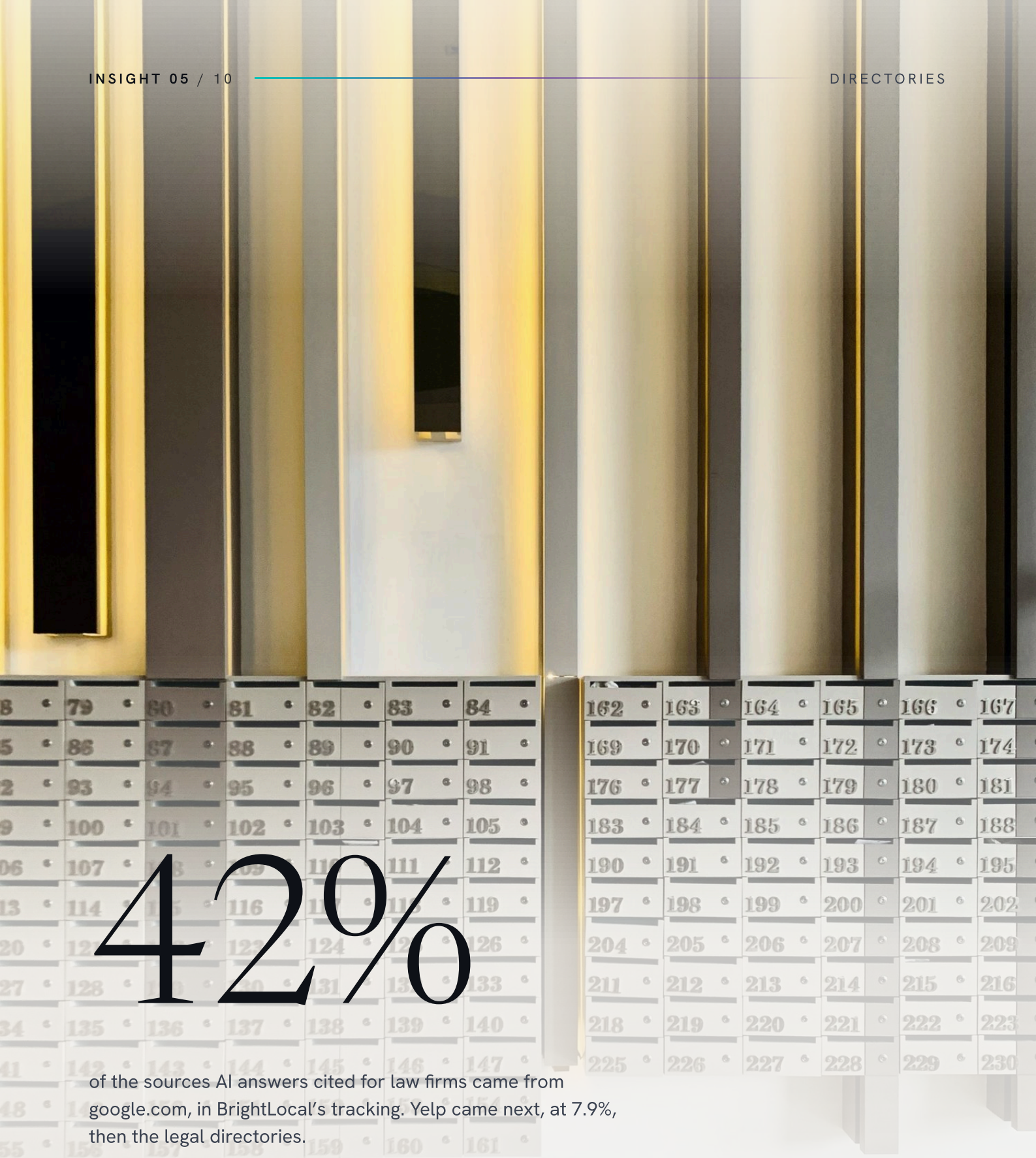
How we know. Muck Rack, 28 October 2026; Muck Rack sells media monitoring and AI visibility tools. Whitespark, 6 November 2025: expert opinion, not measurement. r/LawFirm thread, 11 April 2026: one lawyer's account. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> Your own website is a small part of what the assistant reads about you. Most of the rest is what others publish. In Whitespark's 2026 survey of 47 local search experts, the top factor for AI visibility was a presence on expert-curated best-of lists. A lawyer on r/LawFirm who shows up on ChatGPT's short list explains: "I write a lot on narrow and specific subjects, I speak frequently, and I get cited."

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: list the pages that name firms for your clients' main question: guides, rankings, press articles, professional bodies. Note the ones that leave you out. Then offer each one something it can use: an accurate profile, a case it can cite, or an expert comment on news in your field.



42%

of the sources AI answers cited for law firms came from google.com, in BrightLocal's tracking. Yelp came next, at 7.9%, then the legal directories.

AI takes its names from Google and the directories

WHAT WE FOUND

For law firms in the US, the UK and Australia, BrightLocal found google.com behind 42% of 13,354 AI citations, and calls Google Business Profile "the source of choice for Google's own AIs". In Custom Legal Marketing's 3,200 US lawyer questions, Claude cited Avvo in 87.1% of its answers, and Google's AI Mode cited Super Lawyers in 62.8%. In our test, Perplexity took its first two names from one directory page.

WHERE AI ANSWERS ABOUT LAW FIRMS POINT: SHARE OF 13,354 CITATIONS



SHARE OF 3,200 US LAWYER QUESTIONS IN WHICH EACH ASSISTANT CITED THE DIRECTORY

	ChatGPT	Claude	Google AI Mode
Avvo	29.2%	87.1%	5.4%
Super Lawyers	1.2%	0.0%	62.8%
Justia	20.5%	2.1%	60.2%
Martindale	6.9%	55.5%	0.1%

How we know. BrightLocal, 26 August 2026: Gemini and Perplexity not tested; the law firm sample is about 20 locations. Custom Legal Marketing, 29 July 2026. The directory's note on how firms are ordered, read 11 November 2026. SOCi, 2026 Local Visibility Index: US locations, checked against Google Maps. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> A listing gives the assistant a firm's field, city and languages in one place. In our test, Perplexity said those details made two firms "easier to assess than firms with thin profiles". Some places on these pages are paid for: the directory Perplexity followed states "Firms with a paid membership are promoted higher".

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: start with the free listings: Google Business Profile, Bing Places, your bar or professional body, and any official list that takes firms. Make each one complete and identical to your site; SOCi found business contact details on ChatGPT and Perplexity "only about 68% accurate". Before paying for a placement, check your bar's rules.



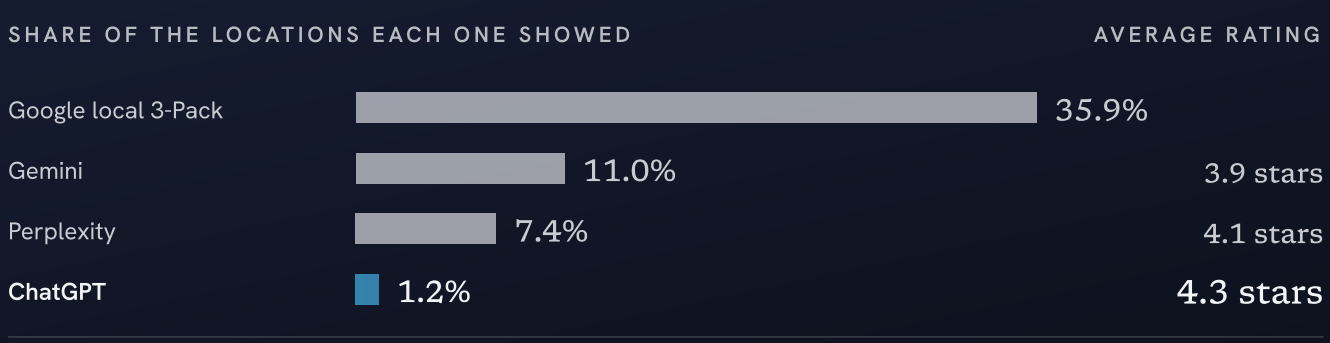
4.3 stars

the average rating of the businesses ChatGPT recommended, in SOCi's study of 350,000 US locations. Gemini's picks averaged 3.9 stars, Perplexity's 4.1.

Good reviews get you on the list, not to the top

WHAT WE FOUND

SOCi asked ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity to recommend businesses in the markets of 2,751 US brands with many locations. The assistants picked far fewer than Google's local 3-Pack, the map of three in Google Search: ChatGPT recommended 1.2% of the locations, against 35.9% for the 3-Pack. The ones it picked were well rated. SOCi's reading: "Reviews and ratings function less as a ranking factor and more as a filter for inclusion."



SOCi, 2026 Local Visibility Index: about 350,000 locations of 2,751 US brands, not law firms. AI answers recommend locations; the 3-Pack is the map of three in Google Search. The ratings are averages.

How we know. SOCi, 2026 Local Visibility Index, 28 January 2026: US brands with 50 or more locations, not law firms; the ratings are averages, a correlation; SOCi sells local marketing software. Google, Search Off the Record, 8 January 2026. Our test, 11 November 2026. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

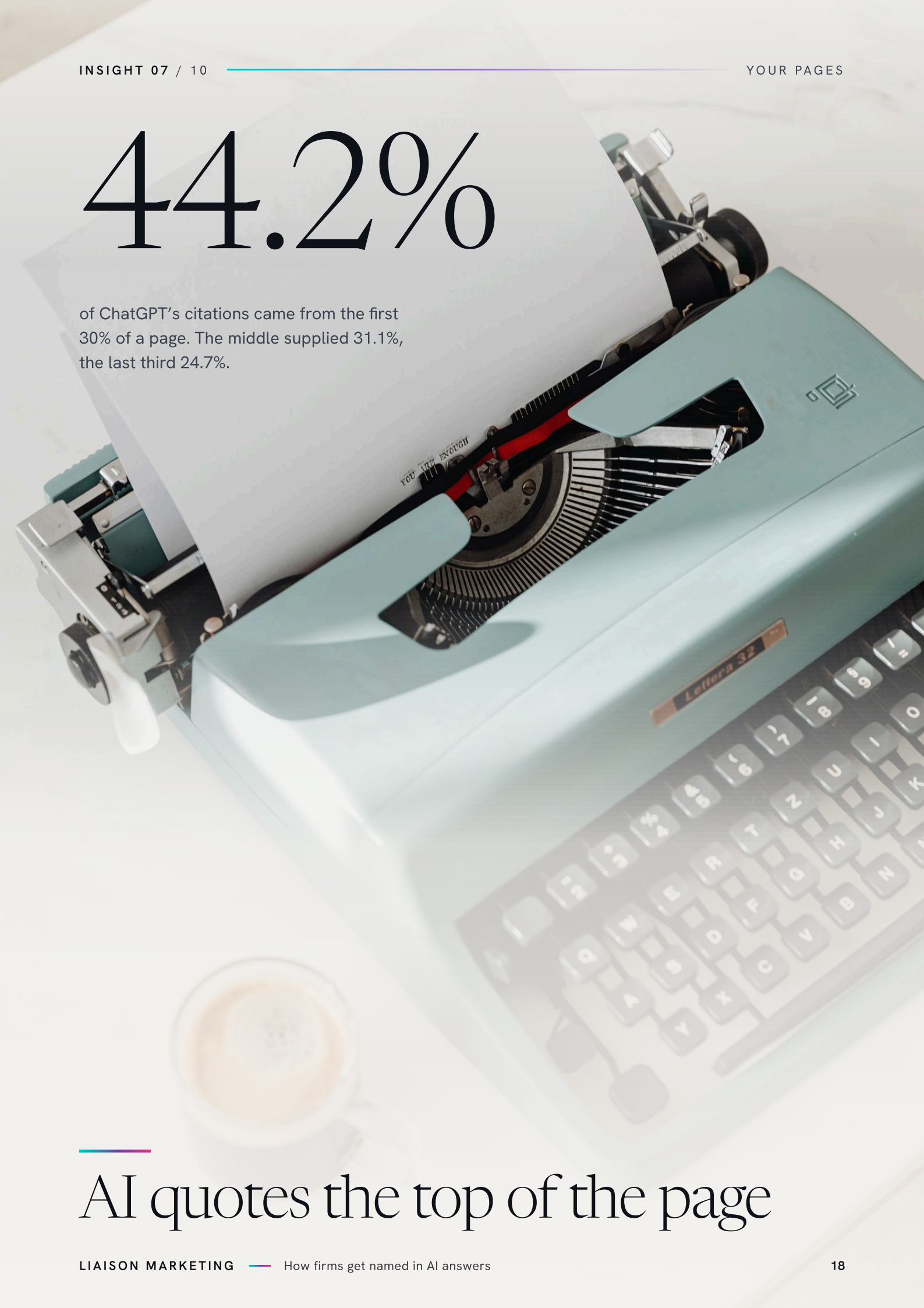
> A good rating gets a firm onto the list. It does not put it first. In our test, Perplexity said: "I treated reviews as weak supporting evidence only." For a small local business, Google's Danny Sullivan points away from technical tricks and toward clients: "Probably need to spend more time on ensuring that their customers are happy to begin with. Maybe encouraging them to leave reviews".

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: ask each satisfied client for a review when their file closes, on the profile your future clients see first. Check your bar's rules on testimonials before you ask.

44.2%

of ChatGPT's citations came from the first 30% of a page. The middle supplied 31.1%, the last third 24.7%.

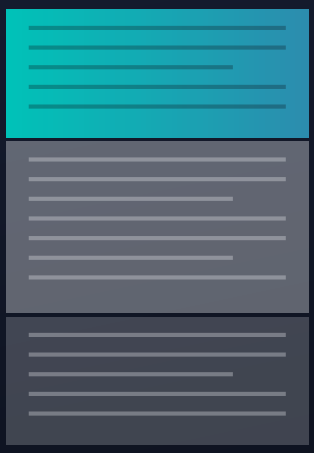


AI quotes the top of the page

WHAT WE FOUND

Kevin Indig analysed 18,012 verified ChatGPT citations to see where in its page the cited passage sat. Nearly half came from the opening. In his words: “The AI reads like a journalist. It grabs the ‘Who, What, Where’ from the top.”

WHERE IN THE PAGE 18,012 CHATGPT CITATIONS CAME FROM



44.2%	**The opening, the first 30%**
31.1%	The middle, 30 to 70%
24.7%	The end, the last third

How we know. Kevin Indig, Search Engine Journal, 17 February 2026: ChatGPT only. Google Search Central guide, updated 10 July 2026. Microsoft Advertising blog, 8 October 2025. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> The opening of a page carries the most weight, so the answer belongs there, in plain words. No special format is needed: Google says “There’s no requirement to break your content into tiny pieces for AI to better understand it”. Microsoft adds: “Don’t hide important answers in tabs or expandable menus”.

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: open your most visited service page with the answer to the question clients type, in two sentences: who you help, with what, and where. Keep it in the page text, not in a tab or a PDF; Microsoft advises to “Avoid relying on PDFs for core information”.



3 of 54

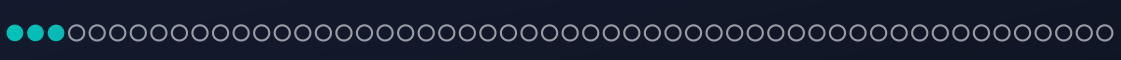
tests of published rewriting methods lifted a page's rank in AI answers beyond chance, in the C-SEO Bench study.

Shortcuts to AI answers rarely work

WHAT WE FOUND

Methods are published to rewrite a page so that AI cites it more, such as adding statistics. C-SEO Bench tested them in six domains: “Out of 54 cases, we uncover only three where the ranking improvements are statistically significant.” Adding statistics lowered rankings in 19 of 24 settings.

C-SEO Bench: tests in which rewriting lifted the page beyond chance



3 of 54

C-SEO Bench: settings in which adding statistics lowered the page



19 of 24

C-SEO Bench: six domains, English, language models reading fixed sets of pages.

How we know. C-SEO Bench, Puerto and others, version 3, 20 October 2025, accepted at NeurIPS 2025: English, language models over fixed sets of pages. Google Search Central guide, updated 10 July 2026. SearchPilot webinar with Lily Ray, 31 July 2026: her observations, no dataset shown. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> Any gain also shrinks as rivals copy the method, “converging toward zero at full adoption”. Google says it does not use AI text files or special markup, and that seeking inauthentic ‘mentions’ across the web “isn’t as helpful as it might seem”. Lily Ray has seen companies go too far into spammy content: “eventually Google catches on, and that will eventually burn your AI performance as well.”

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: when someone sells a shortcut to AI answers, a special file, a rewrite or a batch of mentions, ask for the before and after test on sites like yours. Without one, the same budget may go further on insights 4 and 5: being written about, and being listed.



3%

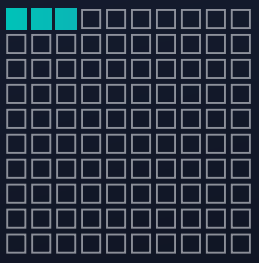
of the searches they fit named a regional company, in a 37,000-run audit. 52% of the regional companies were never named.

Each language and each city has its own list

WHAT WE FOUND

Unusual, an AI marketing firm, ran 215 commercial prompts in 19 sectors more than 37,000 times and tracked 533 brands. Regional companies were named in 3% of the searches they fit, but "much more often when the prompt is bound to their home region". A University of Toronto team asked 100 questions in five languages, Spanish among them. For GPT, the sites cited changed with the language: "overlaps are near zero across the board".

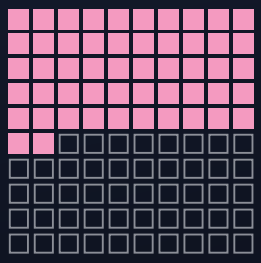
OF THE SEARCHES A REGIONAL COMPANY FITS



3%

named a regional company

OF THE REGIONAL COMPANIES



52%

were never named, in 37,000 runs

215 commercial prompts in 19 sectors, 533 brands. Unusual sells AI marketing services. A preprint.

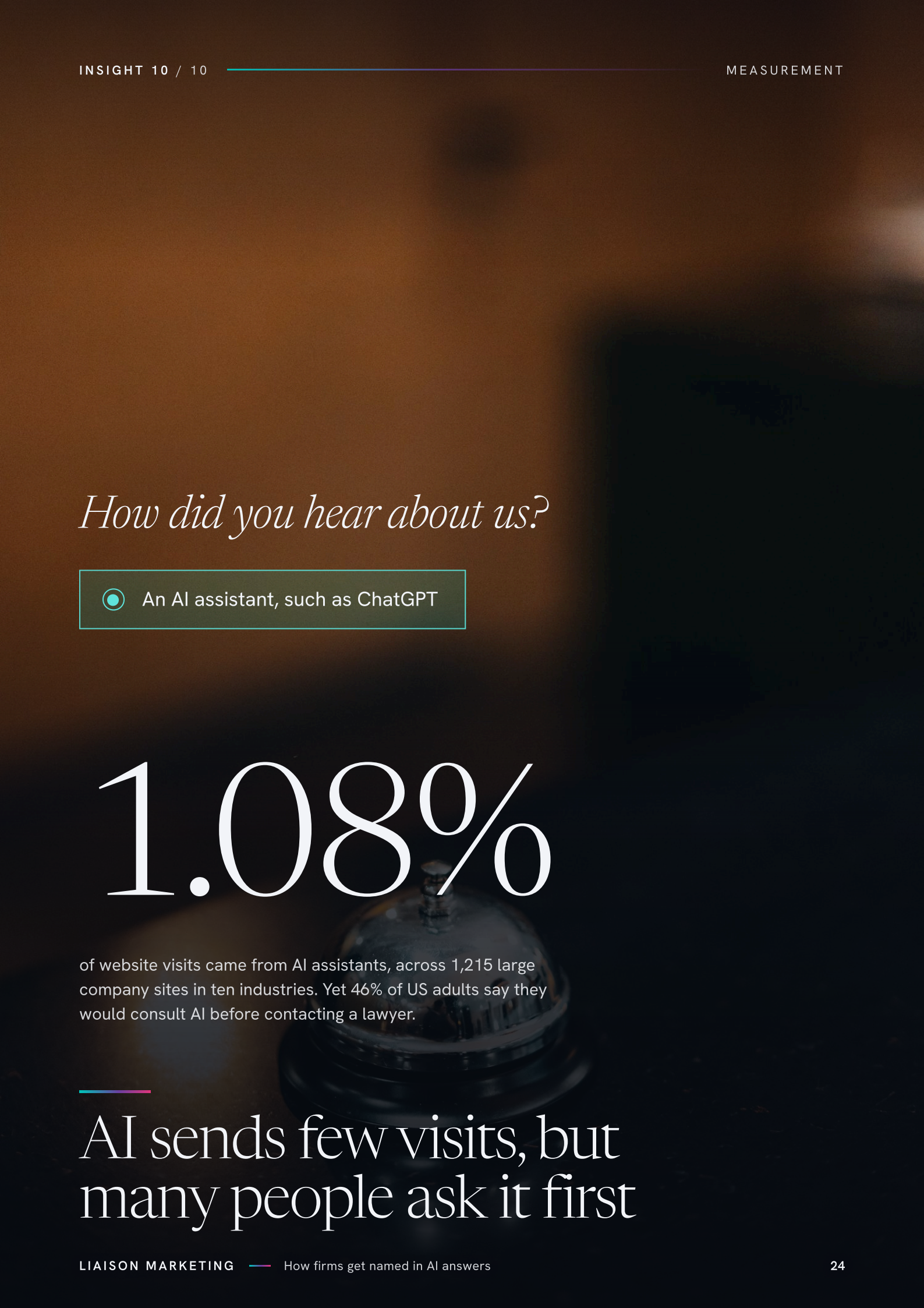
How we know. Jack, Lehman, Maloney and Xu, arXiv, 22 May 2026: Unusual sells AI marketing services; B2B and software sectors; not peer reviewed. Chen, Wang, Chen and Koudas, arXiv, 10 September 2025: consumer products; a preprint. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> A firm can be named in English and missing in Spanish, named for its city and missing for its country. Each language and each place is its own shortlist. The Toronto authors advise building coverage in "authoritative local-language media".

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: run the checks from insight 1 in each language your clients use, with and without your city. Where you are missing in one language, aim for one respected mention in that language's press or professional media.



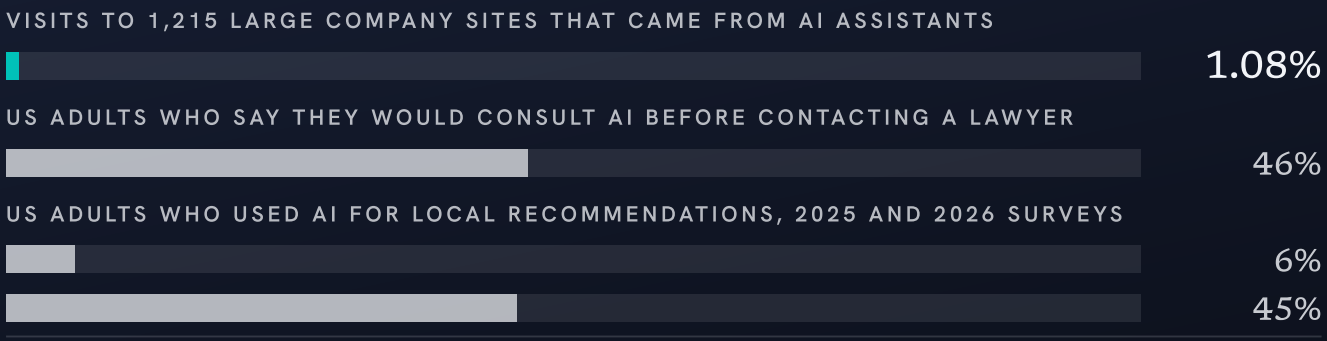
1.08%

of website visits came from AI assistants, across 1,215 large company sites in ten industries. Yet 46% of US adults say they would consult AI before contacting a lawyer.

AI sends few visits, but many people ask it first

WHAT WE FOUND

Conductor measured AI referrals across 1,215 sites: 1.08% of all visits. Yet in Clio's 2026 survey, "46% say they would consult AI before contacting a lawyer", and BrightLocal found the use of AI for local recommendations "rising from 6% last year to 45%".



Each bar is its own measure, out of its own total of 100%.

How we know. Conductor, 2026 AEO / GEO Benchmarks Report, updated 6 July 2026: US enterprise sites, May to September 2025. Clio, 26 October 2026: US adults; Clio sells legal software. BrightLocal, 11 February 2026: 1,002 US adults. Kevin Indig, 19 October 2026: a small sample; he writes that "an effect could still exist". Google, 3 June 2026. Bing, 10 February 2026. Full sources, page 29.

WHAT IT MEANS

> Visits show only part of what AI does: far more people ask than click. Kevin Indig tested whether being named in AI answers later brings searches or direct visits, 632 tests across four brands, and "couldn't establish a reliable link". His conclusion: "I could not yet detect 'hidden' AI traffic without self-reported attribution". Today, the measure that works is what clients tell you.

AN IDEA FOR MONDAY

One idea: add "an AI assistant, such as ChatGPT" to the answers under "How did you hear about us?". Each month, open the free generative AI report in Google Search Console and the AI Performance report in Bing Webmaster Tools.

Ten ideas *to try this week.*

- [ ] Ask your three client questions every working day for a month and count how often you are named. 01
- [ ] Ask each new client which assistant they used, if any. 02
- [ ] Read Bing's AI phrases and check where you rank for each. 03
- [ ] List the pages that name firms for your clients' question and see which leave you out. 04
- [ ] Claim and complete the free listings, each one matching your site. 05
- [ ] Ask every satisfied client for a review when the file closes. 06
- [ ] Open each service page with the answer to the question clients type. 07
- [ ] Ask any seller of AI shortcuts for the before and after test. 08
- [ ] Run the same checks in each language your clients use. 09
- [ ] Add "an AI assistant" to "How did you hear about us?" 10

METHOD

How we read the research

TEST	Gemini, ChatGPT and Perplexity in incognito windows, one run each, in English, 11 November 2026, with a follow-up asking each one why. Every firm site and listing they cited was opened the same day.
STUDIES	2025 and 2026 only, each read at the source and each figure checked against it. Most come from companies that sell tools or services in this field. We name them next to their figures.
PLATFORMS	The public documentation of Google, Microsoft, OpenAI and Perplexity, read in November 2026.
RESEARCH	Three papers on arXiv, each figure checked in the paper itself. One, C-SEO Bench, was accepted at NeurIPS 2025.
TALKS	The full captions of three talks, by Rand Fishkin, Google's Danny Sullivan and Lily Ray, and one r/LawFirm thread with its comments.

Every figure carries its date. The assistants and their documentation are updated often, so check the current state before acting on any of it. No figure from a client's account appears in this paper. None was needed.

SOURCES

Every figure, where it comes from

OUR TEST

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