

Being mentioned is not being recommended: brands are measuring the wrong AI metric

Citation and mention barely correlate, cited sources churn by up to 60% a month, and the same brand can hold a quarter of one model's answers and almost none of another's. Yet most measurement still consists of typing a company name into ChatGPT once.



The shortlist is now generated, not browsed. Across four engines the average commercial query surfaces 3.7 named brands.

The measurement problem in AI search is no longer whether the channel matters. It is that most organisations are counting one thing, calling it visibility, and drawing conclusions from a sample of one model on one day.

Semrush's study of 50,000 brands across 1,094 US categories, tracked monthly in ChatGPT from January to June 2026, found that mentions and citations diverge sharply. Only 21% of the most-cited domains in a category were also the most-mentioned brand, and the two signals correlated slightly negatively. Only 15% of categories analysed had a clear brand winner at all.

THE METRIC

AI share of voice

$$(\text{answers naming you} \div \text{total answers on your target prompts}) \times 100$$

Monitor 100 relevant questions, get named in 18, and your share of voice is 18%. Track mentions, citations and recommendations as three separate numbers: they are not the same thing, and only one of them pays.

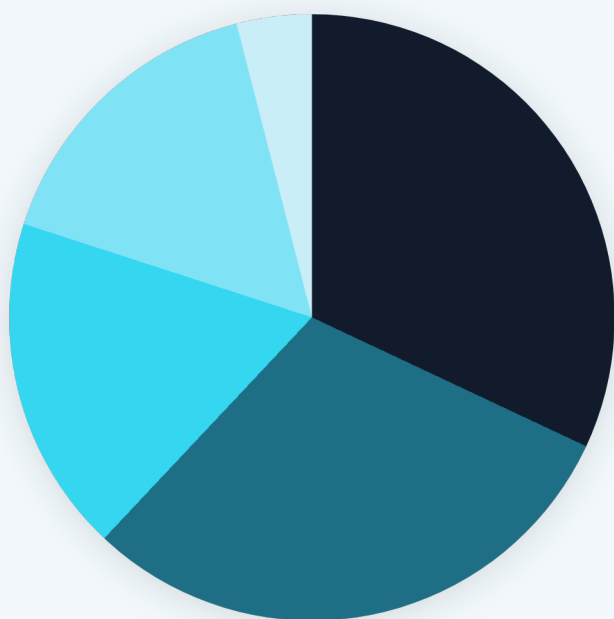
In plain terms: the site an assistant links to and the company it recommends are frequently different organisations. Optimising to be a source is a different job from optimising to be the answer, and a dashboard that merges the two will report progress that never reaches the sales pipeline.

Every engine has its own memory

A Q1 2026 tracker of 8,400 commercial prompts across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini and Claude found brand density varies widely by engine, and that citation is not a vanity metric: brands cited consistently saw a 23.4% lift in branded search volume over the following 30 days, rising to 41.2% at 90 days.

Where AI citations came from on local queries

GOOGLE AI MODE · EARLY 2026



Yelp listings	32%
Reddit threads	30%
Third party "best of" editorial	18%
The business's own website	16%
Everything else	4%

Roughly five citations in six came from somewhere the business does not own. Most marketing budgets are spent on the remaining sixth.

Source: Four Horse Digital citation test on local business queries in Google AI Mode, early 2026. Separately, a Q1 2026 tracker of 8,400 prompts found the share of commercial answers naming at least one brand ran to 84.2% on Perplexity, 71.4% on ChatGPT, 62.8% on Gemini and 58.4% on Claude (Visionary AI Search Visibility Tracker).

The divergence between engines can be extreme. An INSEAD study cited in 2026 frameworks found one consumer detergent brand holding close to 24% share of model on Meta's Llama and under 1% on Gemini. Same brand, same category, same week. Measuring a single engine and calling the result "our AI visibility" is a sampling error with a budget attached.

And it does not sit still

EMARKETER principal analyst Nate Elliott has flagged the volatility problem: ask Google the same question ten times and the results are broadly consistent, but between

40% and 60% of cited sources change month to month across Google's AI Mode and ChatGPT. A single check is a snapshot of weather, not climate.

Meanwhile the click that used to justify all of this keeps disappearing. Pew Research found users click a traditional result only 8% of the time when an AI summary is present, and Datas put the share of Google searches ending without any external click at 57% in the third quarter of 2025.

14%

of brands have an AI visibility strategy at all, on the Q1 2026 tracker's own count. The rest are improvising.

94%

of 250 surveyed enterprise C-level executives plan to increase spending on AI visibility in 2026, per a report cited by Entrepreneur in August 2026.

32.5%

of marketers say they do not know how to measure it, in a HubSpot study referenced in the same piece. Spend is arriving ahead of method.

Smaller businesses are exposed first

For local and small businesses the shift is sharper than the enterprise numbers suggest. BrightLocal recorded consumer use of AI to find local businesses rising from 6% to 45% during March 2026, and found 63% of active AI users trust AI recommendations for local businesses, though 88% still verify them afterwards.

The reporting layer lags badly. One 2026 analysis found roughly 70.6% of AI referrals misclassified as direct traffic in standard GA4 configurations, with the channel undercounted by an estimated three to four times, partly because paid ChatGPT accounts and Gemini's deep research mode pass no referrer data.

A workable method

The approach analysts converge on is hybrid: automated tracking for broad patterns, paired with monthly manual checks in fresh chats on the prompts that actually drive revenue. Build a library of 20 to 100 prompts weighted toward solution and comparison questions rather than brand-name queries, since asking a model what it thinks of you only proves it has heard of you.

Run them across at least ChatGPT, Gemini or Google's AI Mode, Perplexity and Claude. Log four fields: named or not, position in the list, source cited, and whether anything stated about you is wrong. Repeat monthly, and read the trend rather than the reading.

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Sources: Semrush (50,000 brands across 1,094 US categories, ChatGPT, January to June 2026); Visionary AI Search Visibility Tracker (8,400 prompts, 14 sectors, Q1 2026); INSEAD share of model study, cited in 2026 measurement frameworks; Nate Elliott, EMARKETER (citation volatility); Pew Research (click rate with AI summaries); Datos (zero click share, Q3 2025); Entrepreneur, August 2026 (enterprise spending survey of 250 executives; HubSpot measurement figure); BrightLocal (local AI adoption and trust, 2026); GA4 attribution analysis, 2026. Figures are dated snapshots of a fast moving field and should be re-checked before quoting.