

THE AI REACH BAROMETER  
2026 EDITION

# Search is becoming the answer. Most brands cannot see it happen.

A standing reading on how findable brands are inside AI search: the prevalence, the engines, and the widening gap between ranking and being cited.

~60%

of Google searches now end without a click

25%

of US searches trigger an AI Overview

900M

weekly ChatGPT users

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**Published by Mention Marketing Group**

mention.report · Published monthly · Figures span Sept 2025 to April 2026

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The AI Reach Barometer is a standing reading on a fast-moving shift: people are moving from searching to asking, and the place a brand needs to appear is changing from a list of links to a single AI-generated answer. The dashboards most organizations rely on were not built to see this, so the gap between being visible and being invisible is widening quietly, before it shows up in revenue.

This is not a prediction piece and not a single company's data. It assembles the best public measurements available, cross-checks each figure across independent panels, and shows the range wherever those sources disagree. **Where you see a range rather than a single number, that is deliberate:** the honest reading is the spread, not a tidy figure that hides how much the underlying studies differ. An appendix lists every source so any reading can be verified at its origin.

It is built to be read in fifteen minutes and revisited over time. Each edition is dated and published on the first Friday of the month, so the direction and pace of change stay comparable from one reading to the next. If a single figure here changes how you think about where your customers find you, it has done its job.

## Executive summary

For twenty-five years the search engine was the gateway to the web: type a query, get links, click through. That model is coming apart. People now find businesses through a single AI answer, and the dashboards most brands rely on were not built to measure it.

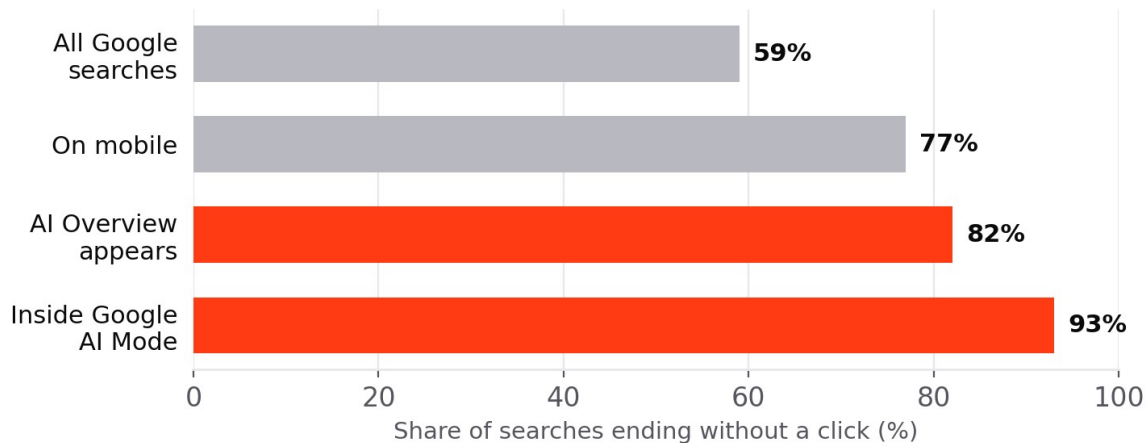
Three findings carry this edition. **The click is no longer the default outcome**: roughly six in ten Google searches end without a click, and inside AI surfaces that climbs far higher. **Ranking and citation have come apart**: a top-ten position no longer reliably means the AI cites you. And **AI sends fewer visitors who are worth far more**, converting at multiples traditional search cannot match.

The conclusion is not to mourn lost traffic but to compete for the citation, because being in the answer is the position worth fighting for. Brands that adapt to how AI reads, cites, and trusts content will own their categories. The rest will not vanish; they will simply become invisible.

### FINDING 01 · THE SHIFT

## The click is no longer the default

When an AI answer appears, the user usually has what they need before any link. The reading is starkest inside the AI surfaces themselves, where the zero-click rate climbs as the context becomes more AI-native.



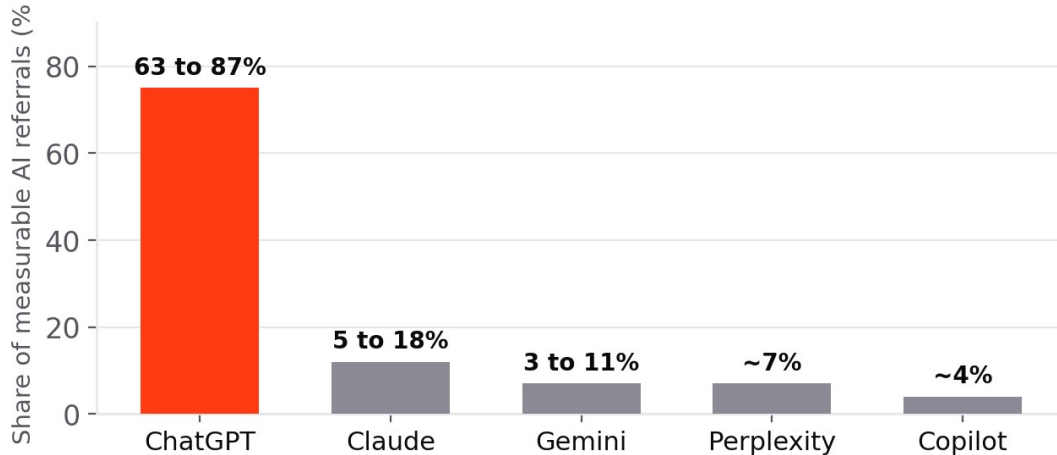
Sources: SparkToro / Datos, Pew Research, Seer Interactive (25.1M impressions), Semrush AI Mode study, 2025 to 2026.

A randomized field experiment found AI Overviews cut outbound organic clicks by about **38%** on affected queries; Ahrefs (Feb 2026) measured up to **58%** for the top-ranking page when an Overview sits above it. The numbers measure different slices, which is why a range is the honest report. Gartner expects traditional query volume to fall around **25%** as answer engines absorb everyday questions.

## FINDING 02 · WHERE ATTENTION MOVED

## The answer is not one engine

ChatGPT opened the category and still leads it, but its early near-monopoly has fractured. A handful of engines now split most referral traffic, and the mix shifts month to month. Estimates vary widely by method, so treat the ordering as more durable than the precise percentages.



Ranges reflect different panels and methods. ChatGPT's lead is consistent across all of them.

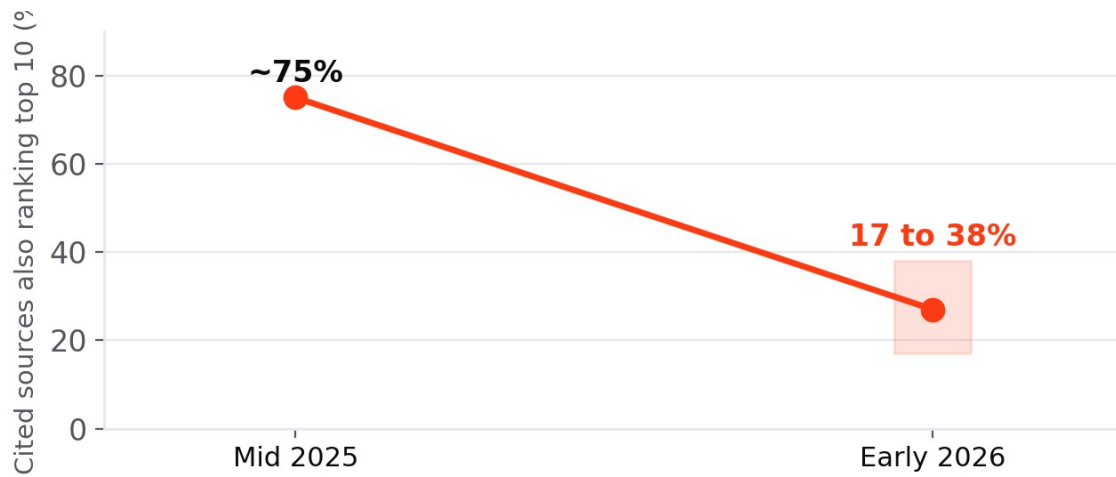
Sources: Goodie AI Search Traffic Report (Wave 2), Conductor 2026 benchmarks, Seer Interactive.

Read the scale before the share. AI platforms generate billions of sessions a month, much of it inside mobile apps that browser analytics never see. The shift is larger than most dashboards report, partly because only **about one in six brands** tracks AI search performance at all. Where your customers ask now matters as much as what they ask.

## FINDING 03 · THE BREAK

## Ranking and citation have come apart

This is the finding that should move budgets. The overlap between a top-ten Google ranking and being cited in the AI Overview for that query has narrowed sharply in under a year. The page that wins the result is increasingly not the page the AI quotes.



Source: aggregated across SEO measurement firms, mid 2025 to early 2026. Range reflects differences by industry and study.

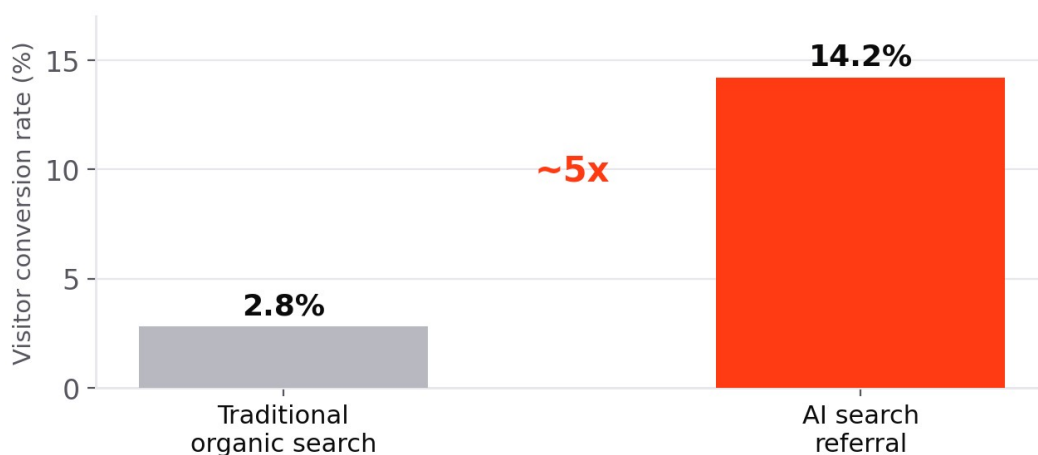
Traffic does not vanish when an Overview appears; it reroutes to whoever the model cites. Citation has become the new ranking. And a structural fact reshapes strategy: roughly **85% of brand mentions in AI answers come from third-party pages**, not the brand's own domain, inverting two decades of on-site SEO emphasis toward earned validation.

*A high Google ranking used to guarantee visibility. In 2026 it guarantees nothing about whether AI will cite you.*

**FINDING 04 · THE QUALITY REVERSAL**

### Fewer visitors, worth far more

The instinct is to mourn lost traffic. The data argues the opposite. People arriving from an AI answer have already researched inside the answer, so they land further down the decision and convert at rates traditional search cannot touch. Discovery, comparison, and consideration collapse into a single conversation before the visit.



Source: Opollo 2026 AI Search Benchmark (312 B2B technology firms); RankScience independently reached the same figures across 12M visits.

The multiple is not a single-study artifact. Semrush put AI visitors at about **4.4x** organic conversion; Shopify found AI-referred shoppers converting nearly **50% higher** on product pages with **14%**

**higher** order values; Ahrefs found **0.5% of sessions driving 12.1% of signups**. Magnitudes differ by method; direction never does.

The caveats are stated plainly: AI volume is still a small share of sessions, small denominators make percentages volatile, some AI visits misattribute as direct, and citation behavior shifts with every model update. The trajectory is clear; the precision is not.

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## ACTING ON THE READING

### From ranked to cited: what to do

- **Measure what you cannot see.** Add AI-citation tracking alongside Search Console and tag AI-origin leads in your CRM so the channel stops hiding inside “direct.”
- **Optimize for citation, not just rank.** Structured, well-sourced content with clear E-E-A-T signals outlasts a single ranking position beneath the answer.
- **Build off-site validation.** Since most AI mentions come from third-party pages, earned media and community presence carry the weight on-site SEO once did.
- **Fix the foundation.** Models favor fast, accessible, well-structured sites. Speed and accessibility are visibility inputs now, not hygiene.

Where a brand is weak determines the fix. Weak visibility and authority routes to PR and GEO work through **Mention**. Weak accessibility routes to specialist ADA and WCAG remediation. The full multi-pillar diagnostic ties the readings together.

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## METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

### Triangulated and dated

The barometer does not run on a single feed. Each reading is assembled from multiple independent measurements, the spread is shown where sources disagree, and every edition carries its date so movement is comparable over time.

- **Aggregate.** Pull the latest public measurements on AI search prevalence, engine share, and citation behavior.
- **Triangulate.** Cross-check each figure across panels and methods. Where they diverge, publish the range.
- **Benchmark.** Set readings against the prior edition so direction and pace of change are visible.
- **Publish.** Release on a fixed cadence, the first Friday of each month, under a dated edition built to be cited and re-checked.

**Sources this edition:** Similarweb, Graphite, SensorTower, Goodie AI Search Traffic Report, Semrush, Seer Interactive, Ahrefs, Pew Research, BrightEdge, Gartner, SparkToro / Datos, Conductor, Shopify, Opollo, RankScience, AirOps, Yext, Search Engine Journal. Figures span September 2025 to April 2026.

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### Read your own reading.

This is the market-level view. To see where a single brand stands across AI visibility, request a scan at mention.report. A weak reading routes to the fix; the full audit ties every pillar together.

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## ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

### Mention Marketing Group

Mention Marketing Group is a Milwaukee-based digital visibility agency helping brands get found, ranked, cited, and trusted across Google, AI search, and generative answer platforms.

We specialize in SEO, Generative Engine Optimization, AI visibility, content authority, technical readiness, and the trust signals that help organizations earn visibility in a changing search landscape.

The AI Reach Barometer is a monthly public reading of how brands, organizations, and industries appear inside AI-generated answers. Published on the first Friday of each month, the Barometer gives businesses a dated, citable benchmark for understanding where they stand and what they need to improve.

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## HOW WE KEEP THIS HONEST

### Transparency rules

The barometer holds itself to a fixed set of rules so any reading can be trusted and checked at its origin.

- **Sourced.** Every figure traces to a public source, listed in the appendix.
- **Ranges over false precision.** Where independent studies disagree, we publish the spread, not a tidy single number.
- **Primary and Aggregated, labeled.** A single named study is marked Primary; a range across panels is marked Aggregated, so confidence is never overstated.
- **Dated and unedited.** Each edition is dated and not changed after publication. Corrections run as a dated note in the next edition.
- **Measured, not predicted.** The report reads where things are. Directional calls live in our commentary, never inside the report.
- **No logos inside.** Authority comes from method and sources, not a client roster.

## APPENDIX · VERIFY EVERY READING

## Sources and confidence

Every figure in this edition traces to a public source. This appendix lists each one so any reading can be checked at its origin. **Primary** denotes a single named study measuring the figure directly (high confidence). **Aggregated** denotes a range assembled across multiple panels that measured related but not identical things (directional; the trend is reliable, the exact number is not).

Figure	What it measures	Source	Confidence
<b>58.5% / 59.7%</b>	US / EU Google searches ending without a click	SparkToro + Datos, 2024 Zero-Click Study	<b>Primary</b>
<b>~25%</b>	US searches triggering an AI Overview, early 2026	Semrush, 21.9M-search study	<b>Primary</b>
<b>~93%</b>	Zero-click rate inside Google AI Mode	Semrush / Seer Interactive (25.1M impressions)	<b>Primary</b>
<b>up to 58%</b>	CTR drop for top page when an AI Overview appears	Ahrefs, February 2026	<b>Primary</b>
<b>~38%</b>	Outbound click reduction on affected queries	Randomized field experiment, 2025-26	<b>Primary</b>
<b>~25%</b>	Projected fall in traditional search query volume	Gartner	<b>Primary</b>
<b>engine split</b>	Share of AI referral traffic by engine	Goodie AI Search Traffic Report; Conductor 2026	<b>Aggregated</b>
<b>75% → 17-38%</b>	Top-10 ranking and AIO citation overlap, then vs now	Aggregated across SEO measurement firms	<b>Aggregated</b>
<b>~85%</b>	Brand mentions in AI answers from third-party pages	AirOps, 2026	<b>Primary</b>
<b>14.2% vs 2.8%</b>	AI referral vs organic visitor conversion rate	Opollo 2026 Benchmark (312 firms); RankScience	<b>Primary</b>
<b>~4.4x</b>	AI visitor conversion multiple vs organic	Semrush, 2025-26	<b>Primary</b>
<b>900M</b>	Weekly ChatGPT users, more than double a year earlier	OpenAI, Feb 2026	<b>Primary</b>

Figures span September 2025 to April 2026 except the SparkToro zero-click anchor (2024 study, the most recent full edition). Where this report shows a range, it is because the underlying panels genuinely disagree; the range is the honest reading, not an estimate.