AndrewRyanMarketing

THE ANSWER GAP INDEX™ · EDITION 1 · SEPTEMBER 2026

Who AI recommends is not who Google ranks.

720 AI answers · 4 engines · 12 business types · 3 cities · 5 runs each

We asked Google's AI Overview, Google's AI Mode, ChatGPT and Perplexity to name the best local business — the same question, five times each, for 12 kinds of business in Denver, Boise and Chattanooga. Then we checked every business they named against Google's local map pack and organic top 10 for the same search. The Answer Gap Index™ is our ongoing measurement of that gap; Edition 1 reports six measures, not a single score.

GHOST WINNERS™

60.5%

of the 673 businesses AI recommended were in **neither** Google's map pack nor its organic top 10 — in any of five captures of the same search.

The six measures, by engine

Engine	Businesses named	Ghost Winners	#1 pick is a Ghost Winner	Same #1 every run	Answer cites own site
ChatGPT	310	58.1%	36%	28%	7%
Google AI Mode	372	53.2%	28%	3%	21%
Perplexity (API)	244	49.6%	35%	75%	77%
Google AI Overview	148	23.0%	8.5%	n/a	54%
All engines	673	60.5%			37%

Unique businesses per city and engine. "Same #1 every run" = share of 36 city-and-business pairs where the first business named was identical in every run. "Answer cites own site" is counted per recommendation, across all runs. The AI Overview appeared on only 65 of 180 searches, so it has no lock rate.

The six findings

01 **Ranking helps. It doesn't decide who gets named.**

58.1% of the businesses ChatGPT recommended held neither a map-pack nor a top-10 spot. The pattern held across home services (65.5%), professional services (57.3%) and B2B (59.3%).

02 **The #1 pick is often a Ghost Winner.**

The first business named held no map-pack or top-10 spot in 36% of ChatGPT answers, 35% of Perplexity's and 28% of AI Mode's. The AI Overview is the exception: its first pick was in the map pack 73% of the time.

03 **Google's AI Overview mostly sits these searches out.**

It appeared on 36% of "best [business] in [city]" searches (65 of 180). Google's AI Mode answered 93% of the time — and 53.2% of the businesses it named were Ghost Winners.

04 **The top spot rarely holds.**

Asked the same question five times, ChatGPT named the same #1 every time in 28% of pairs; AI Mode in 3%. Perplexity's API held 75%, at default settings.

05 **The engines don't agree with each other.**

ChatGPT, Perplexity and AI Mode put the same business first in 6% of 160 runs, and named no business in common at all in 52%.

06 **AI mostly takes other sites' word for it.**

Only 7% of ChatGPT's recommendations came with a citation to the business's own website. The proof lived on directories, lists, reviews and forums.

How we measured it

Same prompt on every engine: "best [business type] in [city, state]." Five runs per city, business type and engine on 28 September 2026 (720 answers), collected through the DataForSEO API; US English, desktop. Google results were located to each city; ChatGPT and Perplexity to the US with the city in the question; Perplexity via its API (sonar, web search on). Named businesses were matched to their own websites and checked against five captures of the map pack and organic top 10. The 60 we could not resolve (8%) are excluded, which keeps the Ghost Winner rate conservative. The method was fixed before any data was collected. None of the businesses in the answers are Andrew Ryan Marketing clients.

Where does your business stand?

Uncover Your Revenue Gap: free, three minutes, no email.
andrewryanmarketing.com/6-gap-revenue-map

Full study, charts and city-level data: **andrewryanmarketing.com/answer-gap-index**

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