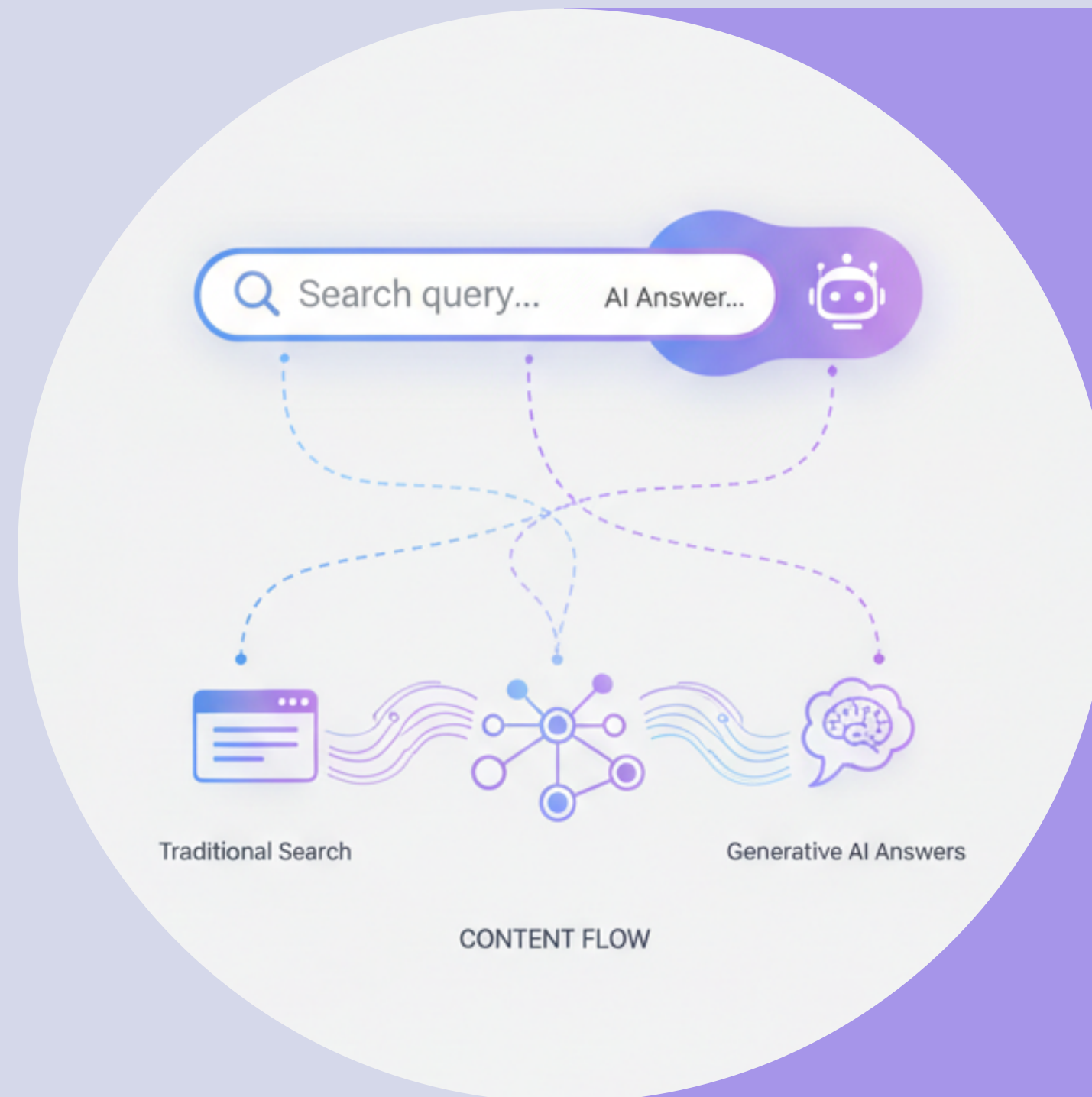


Invisible by Default

The bare minimum SEO and GEO
for B2B startups in 2026



AIHIOM

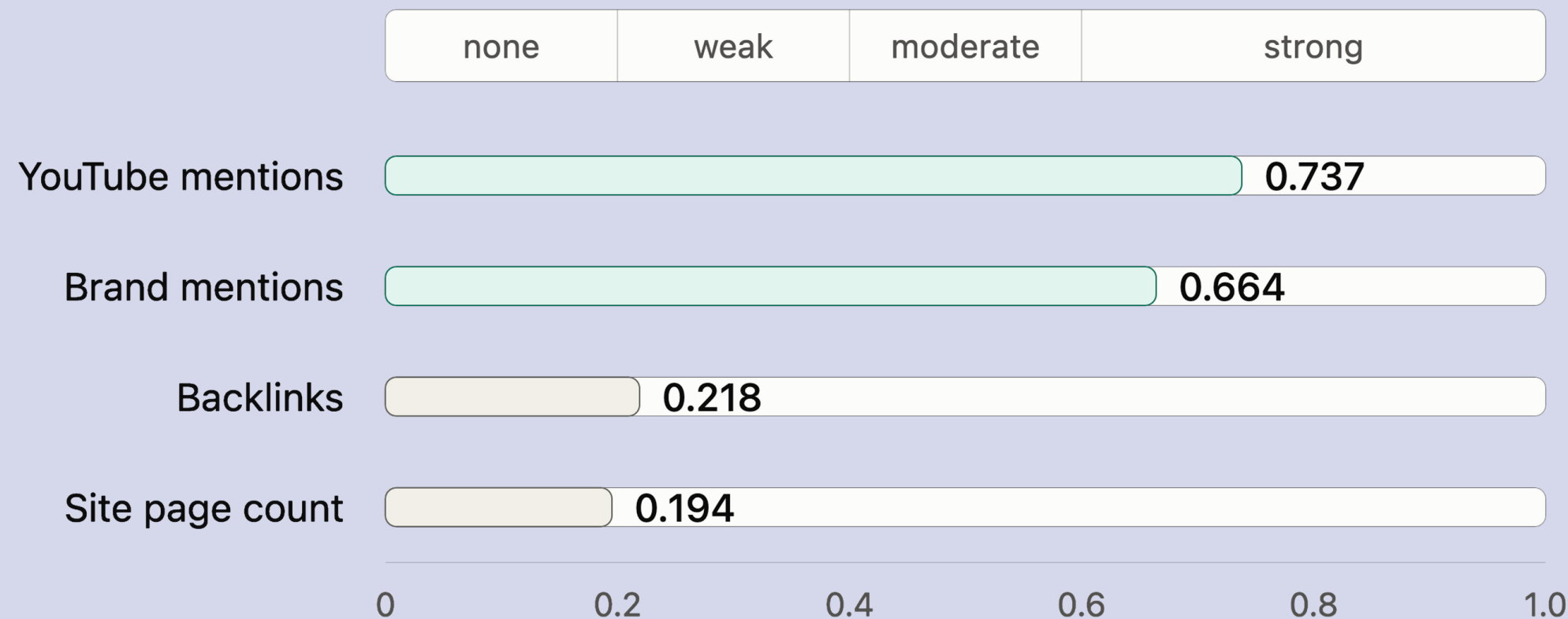
Executive Summary

Your buyer builds a shortlist before they contact you.

6sense surveyed close to **4,000 B2B buyers** in 2025 and found that buyers fill 4 of 5 shortlist spots on day 1, and that **95%** of the time the winning vendor was already on that list. The list now gets built inside AI tools. G2 surveyed **1,076 software buyers in 2026** and found **51%** start research in an **AI chatbot** more often than in a search engine, and that about a third bought from a vendor they had never heard of before a chatbot named it.

There is no separate GEO stack. Google published official guidance in **May 2026** saying that from Google Search's perspective, optimizing for generative AI search is **still SEO**. The mechanism agrees. Ahrefs analyzed **1.4 million** ChatGPT prompts and found **88%** of cited URLs came through the general search index.

Most of the work is now done off your own site. Ahrefs also studied **75,000 brands** and found branded web mentions correlate with AI visibility at 0.664 and YouTube mentions at 0.737, against 0.218 for backlinks and 0.194 for the number of pages on your site.



B2B software buyers bought from a vendor a chatbot introduced them to.

1 in 3

88%

of the URLs ChatGPT cited came through the ordinary search index. Getting indexed is still the entry ticket.

What is being sold right now as GEO is unnecessary. Google explicitly lists llms.txt, content chunking, AI-specific rewrites and special AI schema as things you do not need.

The real baseline is 9 items across 3 layers. A dedicated two-person team can ship all of them in a quarter.

9 Things, 2 People, 1 Quarter

Everything in this paper is **one of these three tiers**. The left column takes days. The middle takes a quarter. The right column takes nothing, because you skip it.



Do This Week

5 hours to 2 days



Unblock AI crawlers



Fix server-side rendering



Optimize slugs & title tags



Do This Quarter

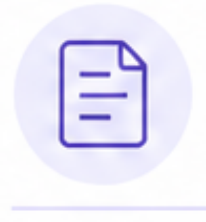
1 writer + 1 founder



Product and home pages



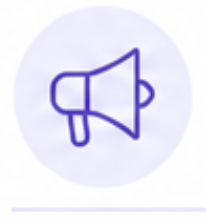
Alternatives and vs pages



Own category listicle



Weekly founder posts



Listicle outreach



Monthly prompt set



Skip for now



~~LLMS.txt~~



~~Programmatic content~~



~~Links bought for DR~~



~~GEO tool retainer~~



~~One blended AI score~~

Why This Changed

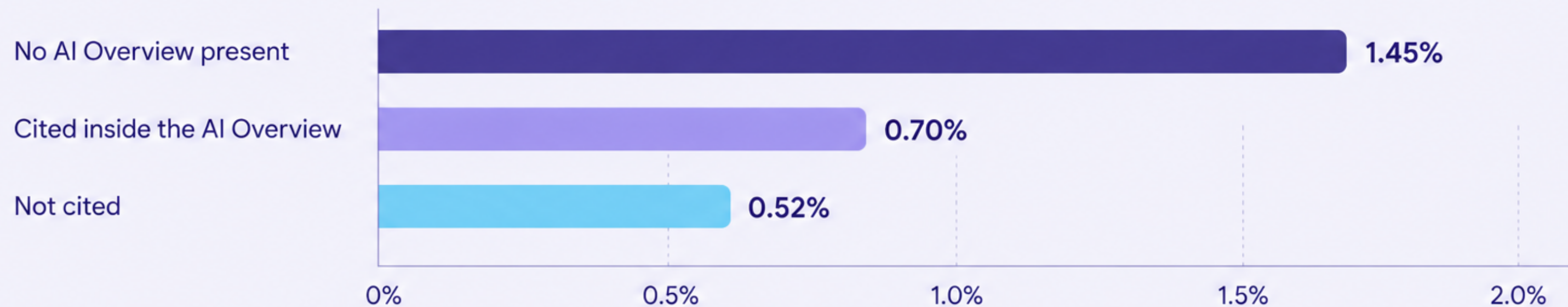
The decision now happens before you know the deal exists because two shifts are running simultaneously.

Buyers moved their research into AI tools and the click that used to pay for your content stopped arriving. Neither shift is a reason to panic. Both are a reason to fix the baseline because the same work serves both surfaces.

The volume caveat matters. AI referral traffic is still roughly 1% of total web traffic for most B2B sites. What changed is not the size of the channel. What changed is where the shortlist gets built.

Number	Claim	Source
95%	of wins come from the buyer's day-one shortlist	6sense Buyer Experience Report, 2025, ~4,000 buyers
4 of 5	shortlist slots are filled on day one	6sense, 2025
51%	of software buyers start research in an AI chatbot more often than a search engine	G2, The Answer Economy, 2026, 1,076 buyers
1 in 3	bought from a vendor a chatbot introduced them to	G2, 2026

Organic click-through rate on queries where an AI Overview appears.



Source: Seer Interactive, November 2025. 3,119 queries across 42 organizations, 25.1 million organic impressions.

Brands cited inside an AI Overview earn 35% more organic clicks than uncited brands on the same query. Being in the answer still pays.

GEO Is Not a Separate Discipline

Google says GEO is still SEO. Google is right about Google.

In May 2026, Google published its first official guidance on optimizing for generative AI features. It asks whether **SEO is still relevant for generative AI search** and answers, in short, yes. On the acronyms it is direct. From Google Search's perspective, **optimizing for generative AI search is optimizing for the search experience**, and thus still SEO.



What about "AEO" and "GEO"? "AEO" stands for "answer engine optimization" and "GEO" for "generative engine optimization". These are both terms you may see used to describe work specifically focused on improving visibility in AI search experiences. From Google Search's perspective, optimizing for generative AI search is optimizing for the search experience, and thus still SEO. If you're considering third-party "AEO" or "GEO" advice or services, review our [guidance on evaluating third-party SEO advice](#).

OpenAI has said almost nothing, and the little it has said points the same way. Its publisher guidance states that any public website can appear in ChatGPT search, and to make sure you are not blocking OAI-SearchBot. That is close to the entire official surface area from OpenAI.

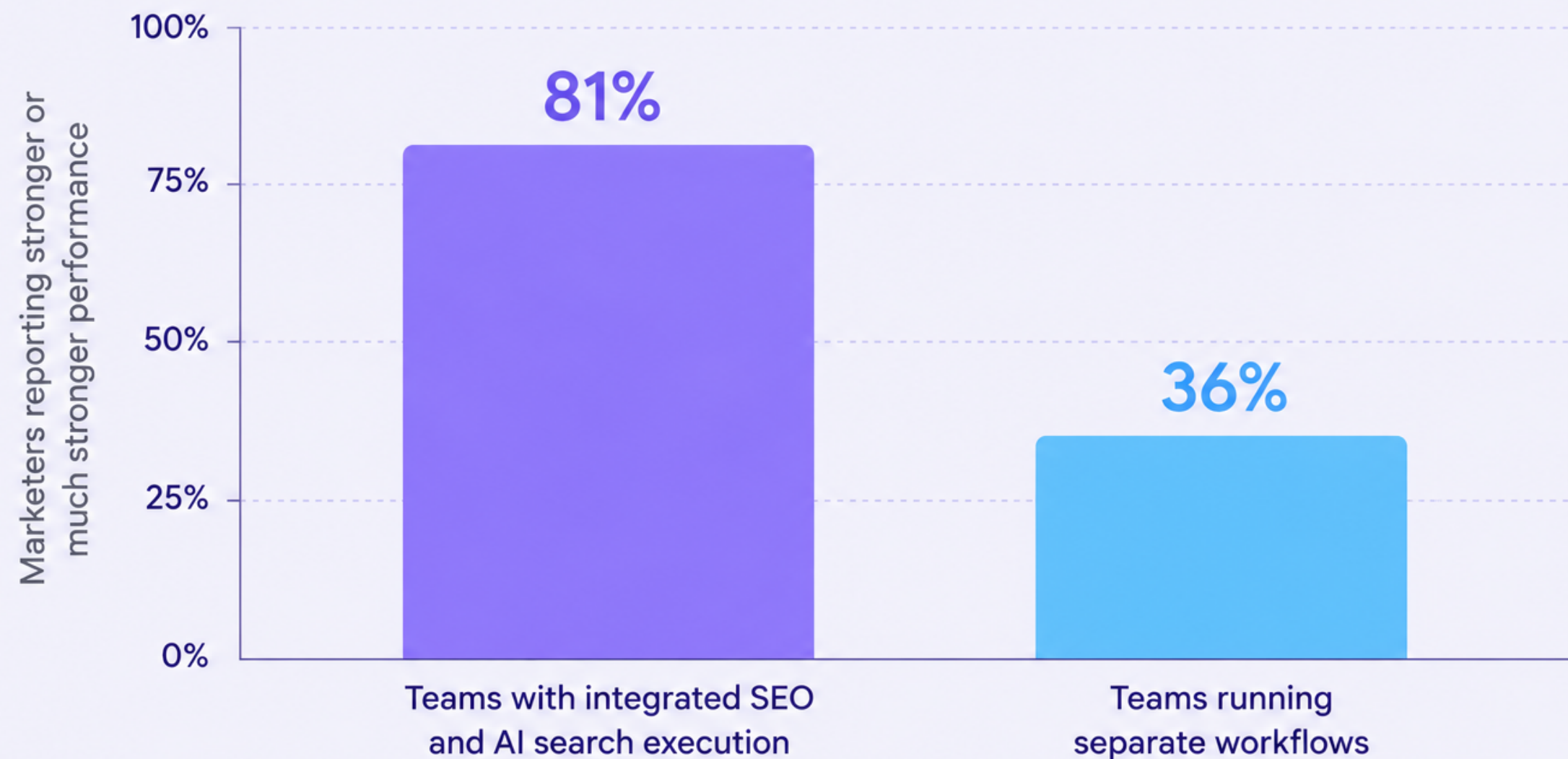
The caveat is the part most coverage skipped. Google's guide never mentions ChatGPT, Perplexity or Claude, and none of those systems retrieve from Google's index. Kevin Indig's Consensus Gap analysis, drawing on a **20,000-prompt sample and 3.7 million citations**, found that **91.07%** of AI citations appear in only one engine. Visibility does not travel.

There is one finding that turns this from a debate into an instruction. Semrush surveyed **481 marketers** and found **81%** of teams with fully integrated SEO and AI search execution report more traffic or leads from AI platforms. Among teams running completely separate workflows, that drops to **36%**. Semrush calls it the biggest single lever in the research, and it is an organizational choice rather than a tactic.

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Performance improves when SEO and AI search are executed together.



Source: Semrush survey of 481 marketers, 2026.

How an AI Answer Gets Built

Getting found and getting credited are two different gates.

A prompt does not go straight to an answer. The model breaks it into narrower questions, pulls a pool of candidate pages, then throws most of them away.

Google confirms the first two steps in its own documentation. Its AI features use retrieval-augmented generation grounded in the existing Search index, plus query fan-out, which is a set of concurrent related queries the model generates to fetch more results.

The third step is where most brands lose. Ahrefs analyzed **1.4 million ChatGPT prompts** covering about **46.9 million** retrieved URLs and found only **49.98%** were cited. Half of everything the model reads gets dropped without credit.

Two details from the same study are directly actionable. **88%** of cited URLs arrived through the general search channel, which means conventional indexing is the entry ticket. And pages with clear descriptive URL slugs were cited about 89.78% of the time they appeared, against **81.11%** for vaguer slugs.

Google's spam policy treats mass-producing pages for every fan-out variation as scaled content abuse. Understanding fan-out is useful. Building a page for each one is a penalty.



What Actually Drives Visibility

Off-site brand signals beat everything on your own site.

Ahrefs studied **75,000 brands** across **ChatGPT, Google AI Mode and AI Overviews** and ranked which factors track with being mentioned. The order is not the one most teams plan around.

Mentions of your brand on other people's sites, and mentions of your brand on YouTube, correlate two to three times more strongly than backlinks. The number of pages on your site correlates with almost nothing.

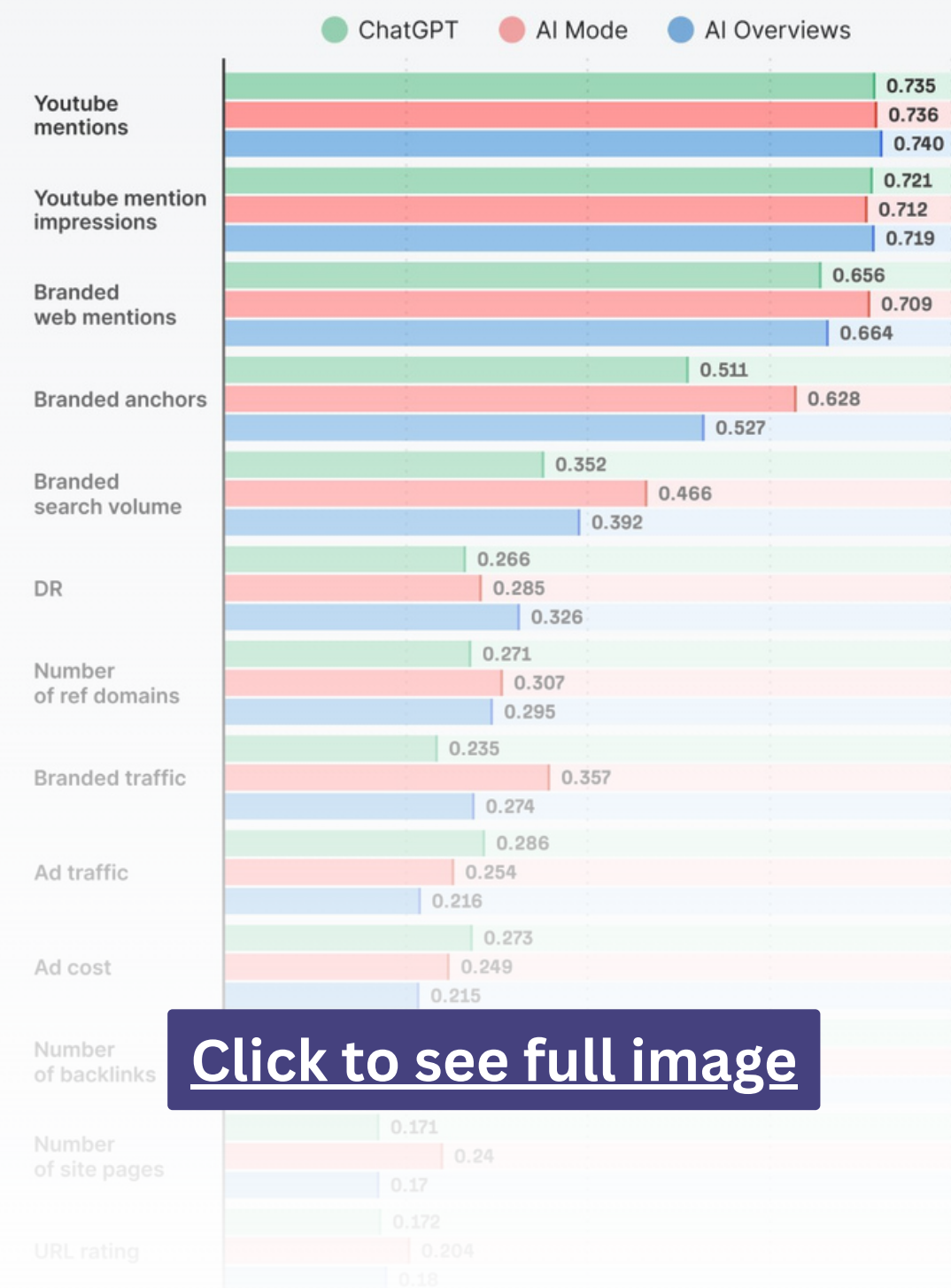
Read this as a spending guide rather than a formula. Ahrefs states plainly that correlation is not causation, and that these may be markers of brand strength rather than causes of it. The practical conclusion holds either way. Ahrefs' own Director of Content put it in one line: it is not just a content creation arms race.

Google warns against seeking inauthentic mentions. The Ahrefs finding is about earned ones. Both point at the same instruction, which is to be genuinely discussed rather than artificially mentioned.

ChatGPT, AI Mode & AI Overviews compared: Factors that correlate with AI mentions

Based on a study of ~75K brands.

Source: Ahrefs Brand Radar and Site Explorer.



[Click to see full image](#)

Baseline One: Access

The cheapest fix in this paper is also the one nobody checks.

Roughly **27%** of B2B sites block AI crawlers at the CDN without anyone deciding to.

Cloudflare made "block AI bots" the default for new zones created after July 2025, and that rule does not separate training crawlers from retrieval crawlers. When it fires, ChatGPT and Perplexity simply stop being able to read you, and nothing in your analytics shows it.

Google is explicit that access is a gate rather than an optimization. A page has to be indexed and eligible to appear with a snippet before it can show up in an AI feature at all.

The five-minute check

- Open `yoursite.com/robots.txt` and look for Disallow lines under OAI-SearchBot, ChatGPT-User, PerplexityBot, Claude-User and Google-Extended.
- Log into your CDN and find the AI or bot settings. Look for a block toggle that is switched on.
- Open a product page, view source, and search the raw HTML for a sentence you can see on the screen. If it is missing, crawlers get an empty page.
- Allow retrieval bots. Block training crawlers only if you have a reason to.

A US law firm moved to Cloudflare in November 2025. Seven months later it ran a check. In the previous 24 hours GPTBot had zero requests allowed and 515 blocked. PerplexityBot had zero allowed and 288 blocked. Nobody at the firm chose the setting. It shipped as a default.

Baseline Two: The Pages That Get The Traffic

Your money pages are your AI pages.

Ahrefs looked at its own referral traffic from AI search and found that over 80% went to three page types. Free tools took 36.45%, product pages 23.12% and the homepage 20.41%. Product pages and the homepage over-performed against organic search.

Their own read on it is worth repeating. It does not mean those pages were optimized well. It means the brand and the products get recommended. For a startup this reorders the content plan. Blog volume is not the lever, since the number of pages on a site correlates with AI visibility at about 0.194. The lever is a small set of pages that answer commercial questions clearly.

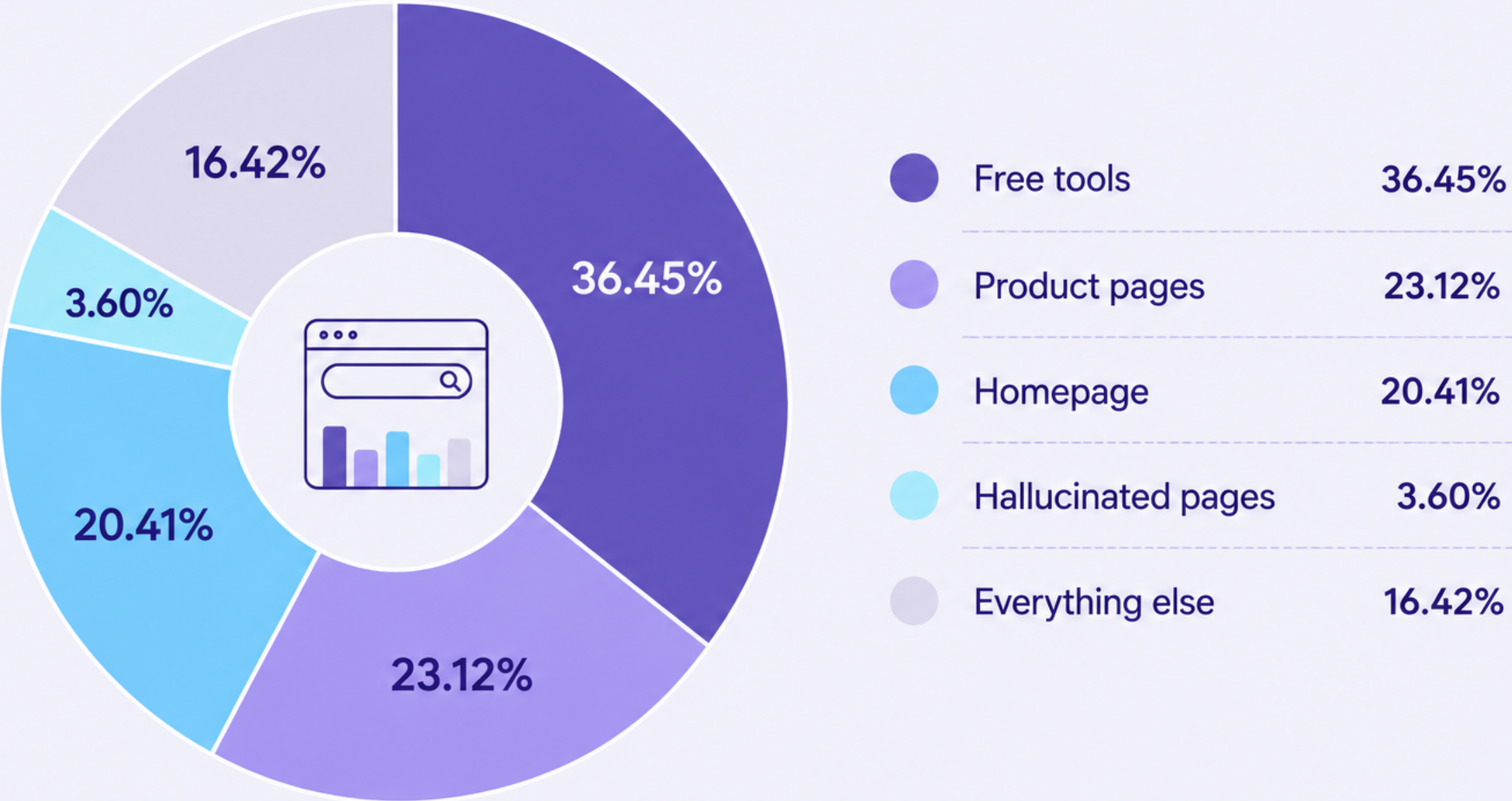
Priority order

1. **Homepage that says what you do, who it is for and what it costs**
2. **Product and solution pages, one per core use case**
3. **Alternatives pages for each main competitor**
4. **Comparison pages**
5. **Pricing with real numbers where possible**
6. **Your own category listicle, competitors included honestly**
7. **Case studies with named outcomes**
8. **Integration pages**
9. **One free tool, if engineering time exists**

3.6% of Ahrefs' AI search traffic went to pages that do not exist. ChatGPT invented them. Check your **404 log** monthly and redirect anything that gets real volume. If the audience sells across borders International pages made up **22.2%** of Ahrefs' organic clicks and just **3.1%** of its AI search traffic. AI search is heavily US-weighted today.

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Where AI search traffic actually landed.



Source: Ahrefs Web Analytics, June 2025, ahrefs.com traffic.

Baseline Three: How To Write The Page

Six rules, each one backed by a study.

None of these are AI tricks. Google is explicit that you do not need to write in a special way for generative AI search. Every rule below is ordinary good writing that happens to have evidence behind it.

The Six

Answer in the first third.

Kevin Indig analyzed 1.2 million ChatGPT results containing 18,012 citations and found 44.3% came from the first 30% of the page

Cite your sources

Cite Sources produced consistent gains across domains and compounded with the other tactics

Write plainly

Fluency Optimization alone produced roughly 28% gains with no new information added

Use numbers instead of adjectives

Statistics Addition was among the strongest levers in the Princeton GEO study, worth 30% to 40% on its visibility metric.

Quote named people

Quotation Addition finished in the top three of the nine tactics tested

Go narrow, not long

Kevin Indig analyzed 815,000 query-page pairs and found focused shorter pages beat comprehensive guides for citation

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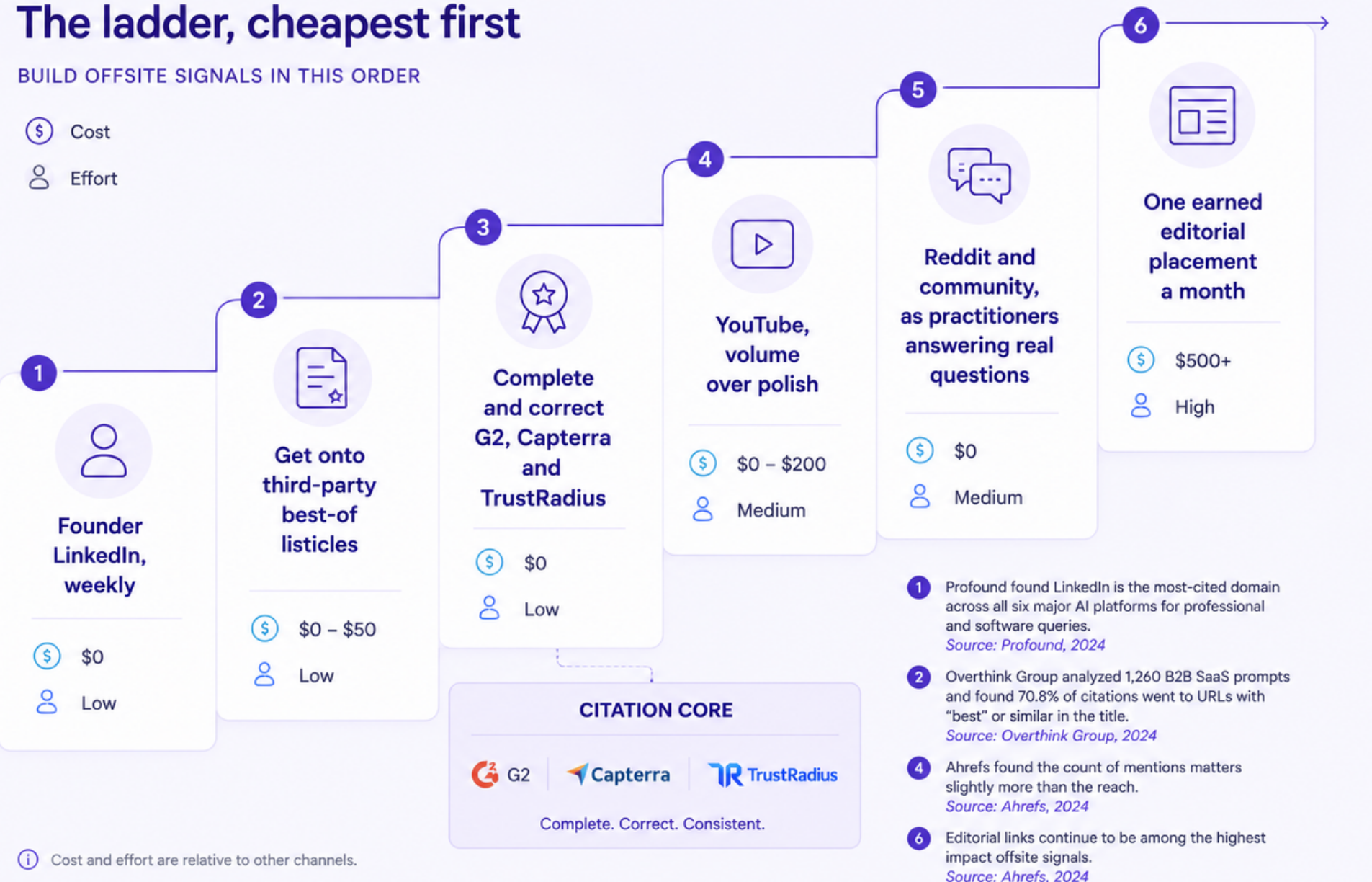
Baseline Four: Presence You Do Not Own

The ladder, cheapest first

BUILD OFFSITE SIGNALS IN THIS ORDER

💰 Cost

👤 Effort



The work that decides whether you get recommended happens on other people's sites.

SEO trained marketers to treat their own domain as the main asset. AI search mostly treats third parties as the main signal for who gets named. Muck Rack's analysis of AI-cited links puts earned media at **82% to 84%** of all citations. DerivateX found ChatGPT cited a recommended tool's own site only **11.6%** of the time.

Semrush calls the small group of sites that AI platforms trust and default to in a given industry the Citation Core. For US software it names G2, Capterra, TrustRadius and Forbes Advisor. Their instruction is blunt. Manage your brand's representation inside those sources, or accept what those sites say about you by default.

The Shopify numbers make it concrete. G2 ranks fifth in Shopify's ChatGPT citation mix at **1,124 mentions**, and Capterra ranks eighth at **808**.

What To Skip

Five things being sold as GEO that you can ignore.

One line only: four of the five now carry Google's own backing.

- **LLMS.txt files and other "special" markup:** You don't need to create new machine readable files, AI text files, markup, or Markdown to appear in Google Search (including its generative AI capabilities), as Google Search itself doesn't use them. Note that Google may discover, crawl, and index [many kinds of files](#) in addition to HTML on a website: this doesn't mean that the file is treated in a special way.



It's completely fine if you decide to create and maintain LLMS.txt files (or other similar files) for other services or systems that use these files. Doing so will neither harm nor help your site's visibility or rankings in Google Search, as Google Search ignores them.

- **"Chunking" content:** There's no requirement to break your content into tiny pieces for AI to better understand it. Google systems are able to understand the nuance of multiple topics on a page and show the relevant piece to users. However, sometimes shorter (or longer!) pages can work well depending on your audience and subject matter. There's no ideal page length, and in the end, make pages for your audience, not just for generative AI search.

- **Rewriting content just for AI systems** [Click to see full list](#) in a specific way just for generative AI search. AI systems can understand synonyms and general meanings of what someone is seeking, in order to connect them with content that might not use the same precise words. This means you don't have to worry that you don't have enough "long-tail" keywords or search intent.

How To Measure

Two free tools first. Buy nothing until they run dry.

Only **14% of marketers** measure AI search performance at all, and Semrush found **45%** of marketing leaders cannot measure their brand's presence in AI answers. The gap is not a tooling problem for a startup. It is a setup problem.

Start with the two official reports, because they are free and no third-party tool can see what they see.

 **FREE · OFFICIAL REPORTS**



0a. Google Search Console, Generative AI performance report

 Launched June 3, 2026

Shows impressions inside AI Overviews and AI Mode, split by page, country, device and date.

Caveats: impressions only, no clicks, no CTR, no query data, and history starts May 18, 2026.

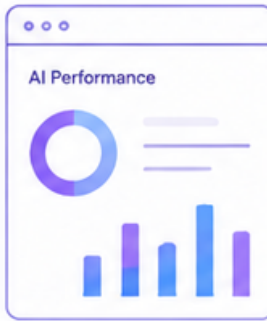




0b. Bing Webmaster Tools, AI Performance Report

 Launched February 2026
Expanded in June 2026

Includes citation share and intent classification. Covers Copilot and Bing AI summaries.



 **PAID / OWNED MEASUREMENT (IN ORDER)**

1



A fixed prompt set

Twenty to forty prompts covering your category, competitors and use cases. Written once, run monthly, recorded per engine.

2



Share of voice per engine

Tracked separately. Never averaged into one number.

3



AI referral sessions in GA4

With a channel group for LLM referrers.

4



Branded search volume over time

The cleanest proxy for the signals that correlate most strongly with AI visibility.

5



Pipeline from AI-referred sessions

The only number a founder actually needs.

 **CAVEATS**

- Attribution undercounts AI traffic, and AI Overview traffic is folded into organic.
- Kevin Indig's analysis of 450 million impressions found Google Search Console filters roughly three quarters of the data.

 **BENCHMARK**

Semrush moved its own AI share of voice from 13% to 32% on target prompts in one month, working from an established base.

A startup should plan for three to six months before the numbers move.



90 Days, Honest Limits, and What The Baseline Cannot Do

The baseline gets you considered. It does not get you chosen.

Section one, the ninety-day plan

Weeks	Workstream	Owner	Effort
1 to 2	Access. Crawler audit, robots.txt, CDN, rendering, slugs, titles	Engineer	2 days
3 to 6	Pages. Homepage, product, alternatives, comparison, pricing	Writer	4 weeks
5 to 10	Off-site. Founder LinkedIn, review profiles, listicle outreach, first YouTube uploads	Founder + Writer	Ongoing
7 to 12	Category asset. Your own honest listicle, then a proprietary data piece	Writer	3 weeks
12	Measurement. Prompt set defined, first monthly run recorded	Either	1 day

Section two, score yourself out of five

One point per yes.

1. Can OAI-SearchBot, PerplexityBot and Google's crawlers all reach your site today?
2. Does your homepage state what you do, who it is for and what it costs, in text?
3. Do you have an alternatives or comparison page for your two main competitors?
4. Did a named person from your company publish something off your own domain this week?
5. Do you know what three AI tools currently say about you?

If your score is:

- **4 to 5:** the baseline is in place, start compounding
- **2 to 3:** the common position, and the gaps are cheap to close
- **0 to 1:** start with question one this week

Section three, honest limits

Three things the evidence does not settle. Say them out loud, because the market mostly does not.

- There is no peer-reviewed research on whether schema markup affects AI citation. One platform confirmation, one null study, nothing else.
- Almost all of this data is correlational. Ahrefs says so about its own study.
- It moves fast. The measured effect of AI Overviews on top-position clicks went from 34.5% to 58% in eight months.

Section four, the close

Buyers evaluate about five vendors and already know four of them. The baseline in this paper gets you into the pool that AI draws from. It does not put you on a list that was filled on day one by someone who had already heard of you.

That is the gap outbound closes.

It reaches the buyers who never put you on the list, and it corrects what the model got wrong about you before a rep ever speaks.

AIH10M