

AI Search Evidence Brief 2026

What business leaders can rely on now - and what remains unproven

The decision in one sentence

Treat AI visibility as a chain from retrieval to business action. Protect SEO fundamentals, strengthen verifiable evidence and measure outcomes beyond citations.

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Search and digital visibility practitioner since the mid-1990s

Use this brief to guide executive discussions, scope an AI-search baseline and evaluate vendor claims. It is not a promise of universal GEO gains.

Five findings worth acting on

1 AI-mediated discovery is mainstream

Pew reported that 60% of U.S. adults had read AI summaries and 42% used chatbots to search for information. These are self-reported “ever use” measures, not daily-use rates.

2 AI summaries can compress clicks

Pew observed lower traditional-result clicking when summaries appeared. A separate randomized desktop experiment reported 39.8% fewer outbound organic clicks conditional on an AI Overview appearing.

3 A citation is not a business outcome

Citation, factual use, referral and conversion are separate events. They should not be collapsed into one “visibility” score.

4 GEO evidence remains conditional

A 2026 survey of 45 studies found no reviewed method with stable, longitudinal, cross-platform causal improvement in organic discoverability and downstream outcomes.

5 SEO fundamentals still matter

Google says its AI features use existing Search systems, may issue related queries and require no special AI markup. Eligibility and retrievability remain foundational.

The operating model

Stage	What to measure	Common mistake
Availability	Crawl, index eligibility, parsing	Assuming publication equals access
Retrieval	Presence in candidate results	Optimizing only the final answer
Context	Selection and prominence	Counting every mention equally
Citation and use	Source link plus faithful support	Treating a citation as endorsement
Action	Referral, inquiry, assisted revenue	Reporting visibility without value

Evidence ledger

The table separates what was measured from what leaders can safely conclude.

Evidence	Finding	Use with this limit
Pew browsing data (2025)	8% traditional-result click rate with an AI summary vs. 15% without; about 1% clicked a cited source.	Observational comparison; not a causal estimate.
Agarwal & Sen (2026)	Randomized desktop study reported 39.8% fewer outbound organic clicks when AIO appeared.	Study setup and population constrain generalization. Quote the revised version.
Martinez survey (2026)	Reviewed 45 studies; controlled citation gains do not establish durable discovery or traffic gains.	Preprint synthesis of a fast-changing literature.
SAGEO Arena (2026)	In a controlled benchmark, citation-oriented body changes could reduce retrieval and reranking visibility.	Open-source testbed, not a measurement of live engines.
Pew survey (2026)	60% had read AI summaries; 42% used chatbots for information search.	Self-reported ever use, not primary or daily behavior.
Google guidance	Existing Search systems and SEO fundamentals apply; no special AI markup required.	Official disclosure is incomplete and does not describe other platforms.

A 30-day executive action plan

Week 1 Define the questions

Select 20-40 questions tied to buying stages, objections, comparisons and evaluation criteria. Freeze the prompt set for the baseline.

Week 2 Establish retrieval health

Check the pages and sources that should answer those questions: crawlability, indexation, structure, authorship, dates and primary-source support.

Week 3 Audit answer visibility

Run the same questions on the platforms customers use. Record mentions, citations, source types, factual accuracy and omissions separately.

Week 4 Connect to value

Add referral tracking and a simple “How did you research us?” field. Review branded search, qualified inquiries and sales-call evidence alongside visibility.

Questions to ask any advisor or vendor

- Which stage of the visibility chain is this recommendation intended to change?
- What direct evidence supports it, and on which platform and version?
- Could the change improve citation while harming retrieval or user experience?
- What stable baseline will be used, and what result would disprove the hypothesis?
- How will visibility connect to qualified demand, not just screenshots?

Two paths from evidence to action

Foundational preparation and semantic diagnosis are different jobs. The appropriate starting point depends on whether the business needs self-guided implementation or a professional evidence-based assessment.

Path	What it does	What it does not do
Findable Free self-guided foundation	Guides the owner through 39 checkable SEO and AI-search actions in ten stages, tailored to the business type. Each step explains what to do, why it matters and how to verify completion.	It does not crawl, scan, score or diagnose the website, and it does not produce an audit report.
SGO Professional semantic diagnostic	Crawls representative pages, extracts machine-visible evidence, evaluates entities and relationships against strategic priorities, and supports an executive report, remediation plan and technical handoff.	It is not a complete SEO platform and does not guarantee rankings, citations, traffic or revenue.

Start with Findable

Use the free checklist at findable.perspectaworks.com to work through the foundational actions yourself. Findable provides a prioritized, checkable action plan and progress record - not an automated site audit.

Book an SGO discovery consultation

For a professional diagnosis, SGO examines what a representative set of website pages establishes about the organization, its important entities and their relationships. The engagement converts the evidence into management findings, prioritized recommendations and technical implementation guidance. Visit PaulBruemmer.com to discuss fit.

Source notes

1. Pew Research Center. Google users are less likely to click on links when an AI summary appears in the results. July 22, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/22/google-users-are-less-likely-to-click-on-links-when-an-ai-summary-appears-in-the-results/>
2. Agarwal, A., and Sen, A. The Impact of Google AI Overviews on Publisher Traffic. SSRN working paper, revised 2026. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6513059
3. Martinez, O. Optimizing Visibility in Generative Engines: A Critical Survey of Generative Engine Optimization. July 2026. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2607.14035>
4. Kim, S., Jeong, W., Kim, S., Lee, S., and Lee, D. SAGEO Arena. KDD 2026; arXiv v2, August 7, 2026. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2602.12187>
5. Pew Research Center. Americans and AI 2026. June 17, 2026. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2026/06/17/americans-and-ai-2026-chatbots-smart-devices-and-views-on-impact/>
6. Google Search Central. AI features and your website; generative AI content guidance. <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features> and <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/ai-optimization-guide>

How to use the evidence

Use exact populations, denominators and study versions. Separate observational associations from causal experiments. Treat benchmark findings as hypotheses for live systems, not production facts. Treat patents as possible architectures, not proof of deployed ranking factors. Recheck rapidly changing platform guidance before publication.

Book an SGO discovery consultation
Discuss whether a professional semantic evidence diagnostic is appropriate for your website at PaulBruemmer.com.