We Tested Google Search Results Against AI Recommendations. The Results Were Surprisingly Different.

Only four of 87 selected Google business entries appeared in corresponding AI recommendation lists — raising new questions about how customers find, evaluate and choose businesses.

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Executive Summary

For more than 25 years, I've worked with businesses trying to solve one fundamental problem: how do we get customers to find us online?

I started building websites while working as a truck driver, eventually creating an online directory business that generated roughly $30,000 a month through Google AdSense. Since then, I've built and operated websites, worked in search engine optimization, developed online publishing businesses and helped companies turn their internet presence into customers and revenue.

I've watched the industry evolve from the early days of search engines to Google's dominance, mobile search, local business listings and now artificial intelligence. Each major change has brought predictions that the previous way of doing business was becoming obsolete.

I don't believe AI makes traditional SEO obsolete. But I do believe it's changing something important about how customers choose businesses.

For years, the goal was to get a company in front of someone searching for its services. Once a potential customer arrived at the website, the business had to establish credibility, answer questions and persuade that visitor to make contact.

Now, an AI assistant can perform some of that research before the customer ever reaches the website. It can retrieve information about competing companies, summarize reviews and credentials, and present a handful of recommendations with explanations.

That raises two questions:

1. **Are businesses that rank well on Google also being recommended by AI?**
2. **What happens when customers arrive after receiving those recommendations?**

We set out to investigate the first question through original research. The second emerged from what I've been observing in my own business and client accounts.

> *Our findings suggest that the next challenge in digital marketing isn't choosing between Google and AI. It's understanding how search visibility, online reputation and customer decisions increasingly intersect.*

1. The Research: Google Visibility Doesn't Guarantee an AI Recommendation

In October 2026, Searchen Networks compared Google organic search results with AI-generated business recommendations across five industries and five major U.S. markets: Miami, Houston, New York City, Los Angeles and Denver.

The industries included HVAC contractors, kitchen remodeling companies, medical spas, personal injury law firms and restaurants.

Using DataForSEO, we collected Google organic results for 25 industry-and-city searches on October 12. After excluding directories, publishers and other non-provider entries, we retained 87 business-and-city observations.

On October 16, we used OpenAI's Responses API with web search enabled to ask 25 corresponding questions, such as:

> *Who are the best HVAC contractors in Houston, Texas? List up to five businesses, briefly explain each choice, and cite sources.*

The AI system wasn't supplied with the businesses from our Google research. It generated its recommendations independently.

> ***Key finding: Only 4 of the 87 retained Google business-and-city entries appeared in the corresponding AI recommendation shortlists — an overlap of 4.6%.***

Industry	Google entries	Also recommended by AI
HVAC contractors	16	1
Kitchen remodeling	20	1
Medical spas	23	2
Personal injury law firms	25	0
Restaurants	3	0
Total	**87**	**4**

The result is striking, but it requires context. This was a single-round exploratory comparison, not a representative study of all Google rankings or AI recommendations. The Google queries and AI questions were related but not identical, and the AI responses were limited to five businesses. Some industries, particularly restaurants, were sparsely represented.

We cannot conclude that 95% of Google-ranking businesses are invisible to AI, or that businesses excluded from these particular shortlists would be excluded from other AI searches.

What we can establish is that **the selected Google organic results and the AI-generated recommendation lists were substantially different in this test.**

That distinction matters to businesses investing in online customer acquisition.

2. AI Isn't Just Finding Businesses. It's Helping Customers Compare Them.

One of the more revealing aspects of our research wasn't simply which businesses appeared in the AI answers. It was how the system explained its choices.

Consider the Houston HVAC market.

In our Google organic results, Champion and Nash ranked first for the search "HVAC contractors Houston TX." Yet it wasn't included when the AI system was asked to recommend five Houston HVAC providers.

Instead, the AI recommended companies including Air Tech of Houston, Richmond's Air, 5 Star Repair Services, House Pro and ARS/Rescue Rooter. The AI didn't present them as interchangeable companies. It assigned each a different role:

AI-recommended company	Role assigned by AI
Air Tech of Houston	Full-service provider
Richmond's Air	Smaller, owner-involved contractor
5 Star Repair Services	Emergency repairs
House Pro	Maintenance and home-warranty work
ARS/Rescue Rooter	Large, 24-hour provider

We didn't supply those descriptions. They were generated from the information the system retrieved.

That raises an issue businesses may not be thinking about. A company can spend years developing a particular brand identity, but when a potential customer asks AI to compare providers, the system may emphasize different aspects of that company.

We haven't established that these particular descriptions contradicted the businesses' own marketing. But they illustrate why companies should examine not only whether AI recommends them, but how it describes their competitive strengths.

> *A website explains how a business wants to be positioned. An AI recommendation can reflect how available information leads the system to characterize that business.*

Those descriptions can influence what a prospective customer expects before making contact.

3. What Information Did AI Use to Support Its Recommendations?

Our research preserved the sources cited in the AI-generated answers, allowing us to examine the information presented alongside the recommendations.

Across the 25 responses, we identified **114 citation records**. A preliminary classification found references to review and ranking platforms, editorial publications, business websites and other sources.

The patterns varied by industry:

- **HVAC contractors:** customer review volume, Better Business Bureau standing, professional credentials and local recognition.
- **Kitchen remodeling:** Houzz, project portfolios, industry awards and business reputation information.
- **Professional services:** credentials and industry-specific rankings.
- **Medical spas:** a combination of business websites, reviews and other published information.

This resembles the information a careful customer might investigate before hiring a company.

Someone considering a kitchen renovation may begin with Google, visit contractor websites, look at completed projects, check reviews and compare credentials. A web-enabled AI assistant can retrieve and summarize some of those same categories of information.

The difference is that the customer may receive a shortlist and explanation without independently reviewing every source.

That doesn't mean AI evaluates businesses exactly as a person would, or that its recommendations are always accurate. It can misinterpret information, overlook qualified providers or rely on incomplete sources.

Nor does a citation establish that the cited source caused a business to be selected. Our research identifies information presented in the answers, not a proprietary AI ranking formula.

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that a company's broader online presence can be part of how its services and reputation are presented to potential customers.

4. Why SEO Remains Essential

Whenever a major technology changes how people find information, someone declares that SEO is dead.

I've heard variations of that argument throughout my career. But businesses still need websites that search engines can discover, understand and present to customers.

Traditional SEO helps accomplish that through technical accessibility, relevant content, clear website structure, useful service information and legitimate references from other websites.

For local businesses, search visibility also includes Google Business Profiles, accurate service information and customer reviews. Google's local-ranking guidance identifies relevance, distance and prominence as important factors, with reviews and ratings contributing to prominence.

In other words, traditional SEO has never been exclusively about placing keywords on a webpage. It has long included elements of online authority, reputation and local visibility.

AI doesn't erase those fundamentals.

A company with a poorly maintained website, missing service information or inaccessible content isn't necessarily going to become more competitive because customers start using ChatGPT.

A useful website remains important for discovery and for the customer who eventually visits it. What changes is that the website may no longer be the first place a prospective customer encounters an explanation of the business.

> ***SEO helps businesses become discoverable. Their broader reputation can help customers evaluate them. AI introduces another way for those sources of information to be brought together.***

These are complementary challenges, not reasons to abandon established search marketing.

5. The Discoverability and Reputation Cycle

Consider how a successful business builds its online presence over time.

A company invests in a website and search optimization. That can help attract customers looking for its services. Those customers may have positive experiences, leave genuine reviews, recommend the company to others or provide testimonials.

As the company develops, it may also earn professional recognition, industry awards, media coverage and additional references across the web.

Those assets create more publicly available information about the company.

When a customer — or a web-enabled AI system — researches that business, some of that information may help establish what the company does, whom it serves and why it deserves consideration.

This is not a guaranteed sequence. Businesses can acquire customers through referrals, advertising, direct sales and many other channels. Nor have we established that any particular review, backlink or media appearance directly increases AI recommendations.

But the underlying business principle is familiar: **discoverability and reputation can reinforce one another.**

That is why I wouldn't advise a company to abandon its existing SEO investment and start chasing an entirely separate AI optimization strategy.

I'd begin by examining whether its current website, business information, customer reputation and independent references accurately communicate what makes the company valuable.

6. The Emerging Question: Are AI-Referred Customers Arriving Ready to Buy?

While conducting this research, I began noticing something else in the visitor data I monitor for my own business and clients.

Some people arriving from traditional Google searches spend considerable time on a website. They review service pages, examine credentials, read supporting information and compare what the company offers.

I've observed some visitors arriving from ChatGPT referrals behaving differently. They may spend only a short time on the website before looking for a phone number or contact form.

I've also received inquiries from people who explicitly told me they found my services through a ChatGPT recommendation.

These are firsthand observations, not findings from our Google-versus-AI study. We haven't yet established conversion-rate differences across a sufficiently large sample, nor can we conclude that AI-referred customers generally close faster or require fewer sales conversations.

But the behavior raises an interesting possibility.

> ***What if some of the evaluation that traditionally happened on a company's website is now happening before the customer arrives?***

A prospective customer may ask AI to compare providers, review the explanations and decide which company seems most relevant. By the time that person clicks through to a website, they may already have narrowed their choices considerably.

That could help explain why some AI-referred visitors appear ready to make contact quickly.

It also changes what businesses should measure. A visitor who spends ten seconds on a website and submits a qualified inquiry may be more valuable than someone who reads ten pages and never contacts the company.

But a short visit isn't inherently evidence of trust or buying intent. It could also indicate a poor experience or an accidental visit.

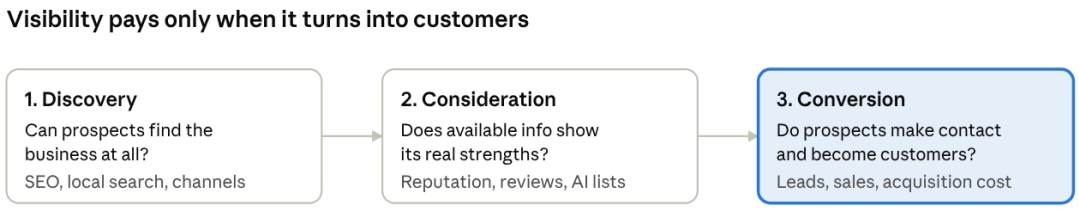
The useful measurements are qualified inquiries, conversion rates, sales outcomes and customer acquisition costs — not engagement time in isolation.

7. From Discovery to Consideration to Conversion

For much of the internet's history, businesses have treated website traffic as a major indicator of marketing success.

Traffic matters, but it has never been the ultimate objective. A business needs customers.

I think the growth of AI-assisted search makes it especially important to distinguish three stages of customer acquisition.



Customer acquisition · 3 stages

Discovery: Can prospective customers find the business through Google, local search, relevant websites and other channels?

Consideration: When customers compare providers, does the available information accurately communicate the company's services, experience and competitive advantages? Is the business included in relevant AI recommendation shortlists?

Conversion: When prospective customers reach the business, do they contact it, become qualified leads and ultimately purchase its services?

Traditional SEO plays a major role in discovery and supports the later stages through useful website content and a strong customer experience. Reputation, reviews and independent recognition can influence consideration. AI-assisted recommendations may affect how some customers move between these stages.

But businesses should resist the temptation to judge success solely by whether ChatGPT mentions them. A recommendation that produces no qualified inquiries has limited commercial value.

The objective is to understand which channels attract serious buyers and how effectively those opportunities turn into revenue.

8. The Searchen Five-Point Visibility Check

Businesses don't need to discard their existing marketing strategies to respond to AI search. They should begin by measuring what they already have.

1. Audit Your Website and Organic Search Visibility

Use Google Search Console and website analytics to identify the searches and pages generating relevant traffic.

Check whether important service pages are accessible, whether their content clearly explains what the company offers and whether visitors can easily take the next step.

2. Verify Your Local and Industry Presence

For businesses serving local markets, review Google Business Profiles, business categories, service areas and customer feedback.

For specialized companies, examine relevant industry directories, professional associations and other sources customers might use to evaluate providers.

3. Examine Your Independent Reputation

Search for your business outside your own website.

Are your credentials accurately represented? Are genuine reviews available? Do credible third-party sources describe your expertise? Are there outdated or misleading references that need attention?

Legitimate media appearances, professional recognition and useful industry contributions can add to the publicly available record of a business.

4. Test AI Recommendations Using Real Buyer Questions

Don't begin by asking AI whether it knows your company's name. Ask the questions prospective customers would use when looking for a provider.

A commercial HVAC contractor might ask which companies specialize in maintaining large office buildings in a particular city. A marketing agency might test which firms help multi-location businesses generate qualified leads.

Record which companies appear, how they're described and what sources are cited. Repeat the tests over time because AI responses can vary.

Compare those descriptions with the company's intended positioning and the information available on its website and third-party profiles.

5. Measure Leads and Business Outcomes

Track inquiries, contact-form submissions, calls, qualified prospects and closed business where possible.

Compare results from organic search, paid advertising, AI referrals and other channels, while recognizing that attribution is imperfect. Some customers may research a business through AI but arrive through a different channel.

The goal isn't to collect more rankings or mentions. It's to understand which marketing investments are producing customers.

9. What Businesses Should Do Next

I wouldn't advise business owners to panic about AI search or abandon strategies that are already generating revenue.

I'd start by asking whether their website accurately explains their services, whether their online reputation supports their claims and whether they know how prospective customers are discovering them.

Then I'd test how AI systems describe and recommend the business.

- **If the company isn't appearing in relevant AI answers,** the next step isn't automatically buying a new optimization service. It is investigating whether the business is technically discoverable, whether its positioning is clear and whether credible information about its expertise is available.
- **If AI describes the company inaccurately,** examine the information that may be contributing to that description.
- **If AI referrals are generating inquiries,** measure whether those prospects are qualified and whether they become customers.

The same principle has guided my work since I started building websites: marketing should be judged by its contribution to the business, not by the popularity of the technology being used.

Conclusion: Being Found Is Only the Beginning

When I started building websites more than 25 years ago, getting a business online and making it discoverable was a substantial challenge.

Today, businesses have far more tools for reaching customers, but they also face more ways for those customers to compare their options.

Our October 2026 research found very little overlap between a selected sample of Google organic results and corresponding AI recommendation shortlists. It also revealed how AI-generated answers drew on different sources and assigned competing businesses distinct positions.

My observations from client and business visitor data raise another question: whether some AI-referred customers are arriving after completing more of their evaluation elsewhere.

Together, these findings suggest that businesses need to understand not only whether they can be found, but how they're being considered and whether that visibility produces customers.

SEO remains an important foundation. Accessible websites, useful content, accurate business information and legitimate online authority continue to matter. AI introduces another way for customers to discover and evaluate that information.

> ***The next evolution of search marketing isn't simply about winning a ranking. It's about earning consideration and turning that consideration into business.***

Research Methodology and Limitations

Searchen Networks conducted an exploratory comparison using Google organic results collected through DataForSEO on October 12, 2026, and AI recommendation answers collected through OpenAI's Responses API with web search on October 16, 2026.

Study parameter	Detail
Google data	DataForSEO organic results, collected October 12, 2026
AI data	OpenAI Responses API with web search, collected October 16, 2026
Markets	Miami, Houston, New York City, Los Angeles, Denver
Industries	HVAC, kitchen remodeling, medical spas, personal injury law, restaurants
Google entries	99 collected; 12 excluded; 87 retained (86 distinct domains)
AI questions	25, one retained answer each, up to 5 recommendations per answer
Citation records	114
Overlap	4 of 87 entries (4.6%)

The Google workbook contained 99 entries. Twelve directory, publisher, government and other non-provider entries were excluded, leaving 87 business-and-city entries representing 86 distinct normalized website domains.

The AI portion consisted of 25 independent industry-and-city questions, each requesting up to five business recommendations and supporting sources. One successful answer was retained for each question. Four of the 87 retained baseline entries appeared in the corresponding AI shortlists.

The test used a web-enabled API model rather than the consumer ChatGPT interface. The Google and AI queries differed in wording and format. The Google sample was uneven across industries and included some rankings beyond the first page; four industry-and-city groups had no retained Google baseline entries.

The results are descriptive of this particular sample and test. They do not establish overall AI invisibility, a universal ranking formula, lost revenue or a causal relationship between reviews, media coverage, SEO and AI recommendations.

The source analysis examined 114 saved citation records. Its preliminary categories should not be interpreted as verified measures of the relative influence of different source types.

The observations about AI-referred website visitors are drawn from John's professional experience and were not part of the controlled research. No aggregate conversion-rate or sales-cycle comparison was conducted.

About the Author

John Colascione is the founder and CEO of **Searchen Networks**, a digital marketing and SEO company. With more than 25 years of experience in online publishing, website development, search optimization and digital entrepreneurship, he helps businesses improve their online visibility, lead generation and customer acquisition.

He is the author of *Mastering Your Website*.

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