

Two Paths To AI Visibility

Winning Brand Territory Inside
ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity

The Backstory

For years, winning in search meant winning a results page. You optimized a site, built authority, and climbed toward position one. That game had clear rules, and for an industrial manufacturer already fighting an uphill battle in a category where a competitor's name doubles as the exact keyword buyers search, we had already built a strategy around it.

Then the game changed, and the old rules no longer applied. **Buyers stopped typing keywords into a search bar and started asking questions directly in ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity.** Instead of scanning ten blue links and deciding for themselves, buyers were handed a single answer, often naming two or three brands, sometimes just one. The question was no longer where you ranked. It was whether you got mentioned at all when someone asked an AI assistant to recommend a solution.

This is a fundamentally different problem from SEO, and most businesses have not caught up to that fact yet. We wanted to understand it properly, so we ran two separate plays at the same time: one paid and one organic. The goal was to see how each actually influenced what an AI assistant said, and what that meant for the business behind it.

What AI Visibility Actually Is

Before we get into results, it's worth explaining what we are actually measuring, because AI visibility is not the same thing as a search ranking, and treating it that way is where most businesses go wrong.

When someone asks ChatGPT, Gemini, or Perplexity a question, the assistant does not return a list of links. It generates an answer, and it builds that answer by drawing on two things: what it learned during training, and, increasingly, what it retrieves live from the web when it answers a question that needs current information. A brand can show up in that answer in three distinct ways, and each one matters differently.

1 in 3 searches now start with AI,
not Google.



A **mention** is simply the brand's name appearing in the AI's answer. A **citation** is a specific source the AI points to as the basis for what it said, functionally similar to a backlink, except the audience is a language model deciding what to trust rather than a person clicking through. A cited page is a specific URL on your site that the AI has pulled from and is willing to reference by name. The more distinct pages an AI cites, the more it treats your site as a broad, credible source rather than a single lucky hit.

Share of voice takes this a step further. It measures, across a set of AI generated answers in your category, what percentage of total brand mentions belong to you versus your competitors. It's the AI search equivalent of asking who comes up when someone asks about your category, and how often it's you rather than them.

The businesses that struggle with AI visibility usually have one of two problems. Either their content has little chance of being cited because it was not written in a way that AI can extract and trust, or they have never tested whether paid media can influence an AI assistant's answers. Instead, they have simply assumed AI visibility is something that happens to you rather than something you can build.

The Two Sides of AI Visibility

We approached this from both directions on purpose, because paid and organic solve genuinely different problems in AI search, just as they do in traditional search, only faster and less forgiving.

Paid buys attention on a timeline you control. You can test a hypothesis in weeks instead of months, but the moment the budget stops, the effect starts fading, because you are essentially renting a temporary signal rather than building a permanent one.

Organic buys authority that compounds. It takes longer to show up, and there is no way to force it faster with a bigger budget. But once AI assistants recognize your site as a credible source in a category, that trust does not disappear the day you stop actively working on it. It holds, and continues to deliver value.

Running both side by side gave us a clear view of what each approach can actually achieve, rather than relying on assumptions.



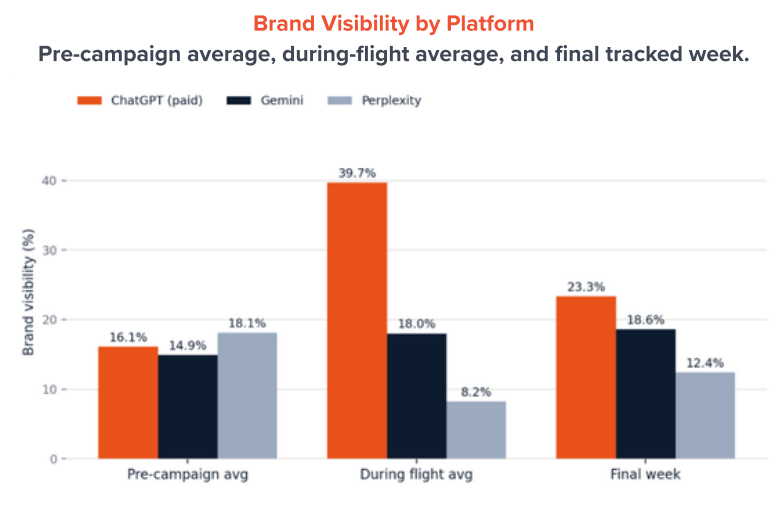
Side One: The Paid Play

The problem we were testing was simple to state and hard to answer with confidence. **Could paid media make an AI assistant mention a brand more often, in much the same way we have always been able to buy visibility in traditional search?** Nobody on our team had run this experiment before, and there was no established playbook to follow.

So we built one.

We activated a ChatGPT ad campaign designed specifically to increase brand visibility inside the assistant's generated answers, and we tracked visibility on a weekly basis before, during, and after the flight, alongside the same metric for two competitor platforms that were not receiving any paid support, Gemini and Perplexity. That comparison mattered as much as the campaign itself, because without it, we would have no way of knowing whether any lift we saw came from the campaign or from something happening in the broader market that would have shown up everywhere at once.

In the twelve weeks before the campaign launched, ChatGPT visibility for the brand averaged 16.1% and never once rose above 19%, a flat, unremarkable baseline. Once the campaign went live, that average climbed to 39.7% during the flight, more than double where it started, with a peak week reaching above 54%. This is the kind of jump that, in a category as competitive as this one, does not happen by accident



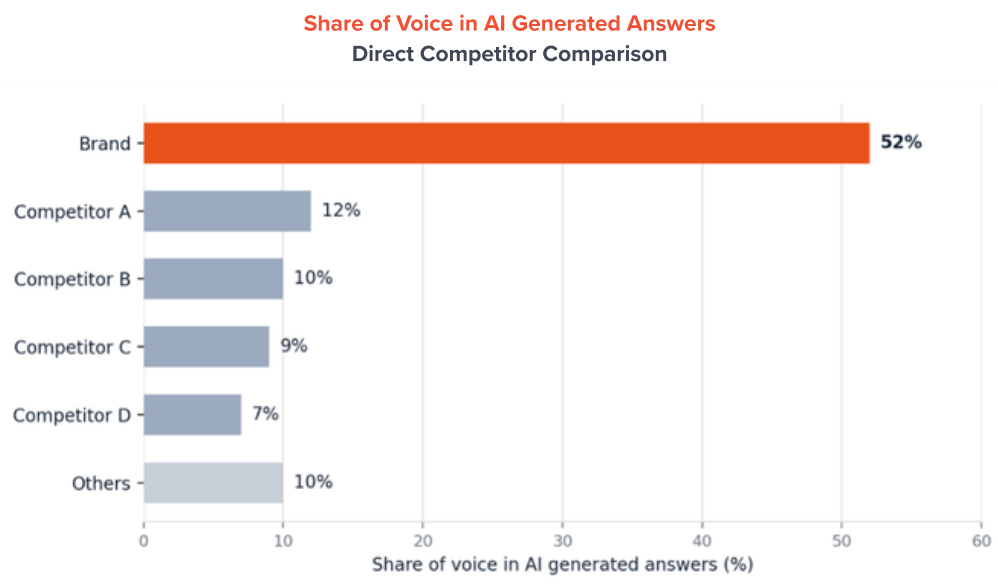
One small budget, one short campaign on ChatGPT Ads, and AI visibility rose 23.6 points.



Then the flight ended, and that's where the more interesting result appeared. By the final tracked week, visibility had settled at 23.3%. Still meaningfully above the 16.1% starting point, but well off the 39.7% flight average and nowhere near the peak. Paid visibility fades once you stop paying for it. That is not a flaw in the approach, it is simply what the approach is designed to do. Knowing that in advance changes how you plan a campaign like this.

The comparison data confirmed the lift was real and specific to the channel we activated. Gemini visibility moved slightly from a 14.9% pre-campaign average, to 18.0% during the flight, and 18.6% in the final week, a small steady climb with no sharp spike. Perplexity moved in the opposite direction entirely, dropping from an 18.1% pre-campaign average to 8.2% during the flight window, before partially recovering to 12.4% in the final week. If the market itself had been shifting in the brand's favor during this period, we would expect to see some version of that lift across all three platforms. **Instead, we saw a sharp, isolated spike precisely on the one platform we paid to influence, while the two we did not touch remained comparatively flat or declined. That contrast gave us the clearest evidence that the paid activity was having an effect.**

Share of voice data across the combined pre-campaign and flight window told the same story from a different angle. The brand held 52% share of voice in AI generated answers across the category, more than four times the next closest competitor at 12%, with the remainder split thinly across a handful of others. A dominant position, and one the paid campaign had a direct hand in building during the active weeks.



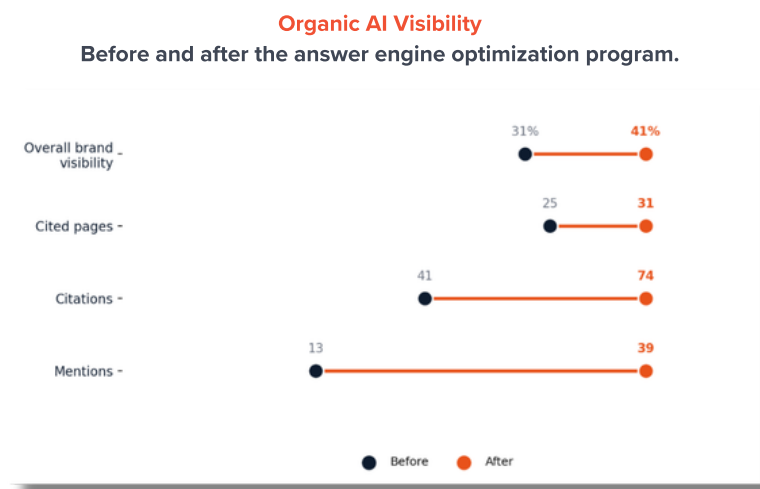
Side Two: The Organic Play

While the paid campaign proved that AI visibility could be bought, a slower story was already playing out. This client had an existing structural SEO program in place – the same domain-level content and keyword work covered in our street furniture case study – built to win organic rankings in a category where a competitor's name was the highest-value keyword.

That program treated **Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)** as a deliberate part of the strategy. Our goal was to give the content equal weight in Google search and AI tools, rather than treating visibility in one as a side effect of success in the other. That meant keyword research tuned to how buyers actually phrase questions, structural metadata that gives search engines and language models clearer signals, and FAQ content built around the way LLMs retrieve and use language. The result was visibility across both channels because we built for both. And that is the clearest lesson from this case study.

AI assistants that retrieve live information are reading the same signals search engines already reward: clear structure, consistent keyword usage, and pages that say the same thing in the heading, body copy, and metadata. A domain Google trusts to answer a category's questions is a domain an AI assistant is more likely to cite. Organic authority and AI citability are closely related goals, measured by two different systems.

The numbers moved accordingly. Brand mentions in AI generated answers grew from 13 to 39. Citations, the AI equivalent of a backlink, grew from 41 to 74. Cited pages grew from 25 to 31, showing the AI was pulling from a broader base of the site rather than repeating one page. Overall brand visibility in AI answers grew from 31% to 41%.



None of that required ongoing ad spend to sustain. It came from structural work that was already earning its keep in traditional organic search, and was now delivering a second, unplanned benefit: helping AI assistants describe and recommend the brand.

What This Means

Put both sides next to each other and the lesson becomes obvious in a way it never would have if you only ran one. The paid campaign proved that **AI visibility can be bought**, quickly and convincingly, but only for as long as you keep paying for it. The organic work proved that **AI visibility can also be earned**, more slowly, without a direct campaign behind it, and that earned visibility does not evaporate the moment attention moves elsewhere. Run separately, either approach tells half a story. Run together, they show a brand that shows up in AI answers whether or not a campaign happens to be live in a given week, which is the actual goal.

The business case for caring about any of this comes down to one distinction that is easy to miss. **Higher AI visibility is not about volume.** It will not send you thousands of additional website visitors, and if you measure success by traffic count alone, you will miss what actually happened here.

What it can produce instead is more valuable referral traffic: customers who asked an AI assistant a question, received an answer that pointed them toward this brand specifically, and arrived at the website already informed about what they were looking for. In this program, that showed up as an increase from 2 to 10 high-intent leads. That is a small number by traditional marketing standards, but significant in practice. These were buyers who arrived pre-qualified by the AI assistant itself before a single conversation with sales ever happened.

39.7%

ChatGPT visibility during the paid flight.

52%

Share of voice in AI answers, 4x the nearest competitor

80.5%

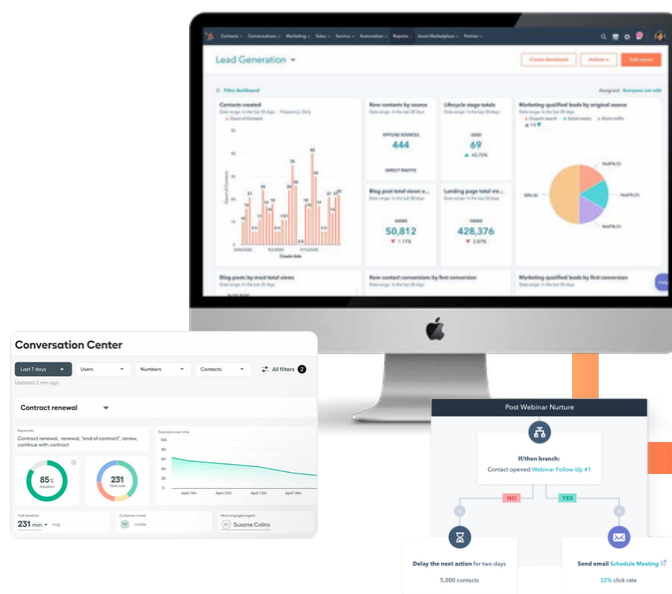
Growth in citations in AI answers

400%

Growth in high-intent leads from AI referral traffic

Curious about the results and what they could mean for you?

TALK TO US



Connect With Us to Learn More.



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