

# Spotlight on Startups Examines Earned Media Strategy Amid AI Advertising Divide

*Spotlight on Startups says the split confirms earned media, not paid placement, is the more durable path to AI citation for B2B founders.*

LAGUNA NIGUEL, CA, UNITED STATES, June 20, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A growing divide in how AI platforms approach advertising is reshaping the conversation around AI visibility -- and [Spotlight on Startups](#) says the divide confirms a strategy it has built its business around: third-party earned

media, not paid placement, is the more durable path to being cited by AI engines. Most B2B founders in Orange County and Southern California currently have no access to that path.

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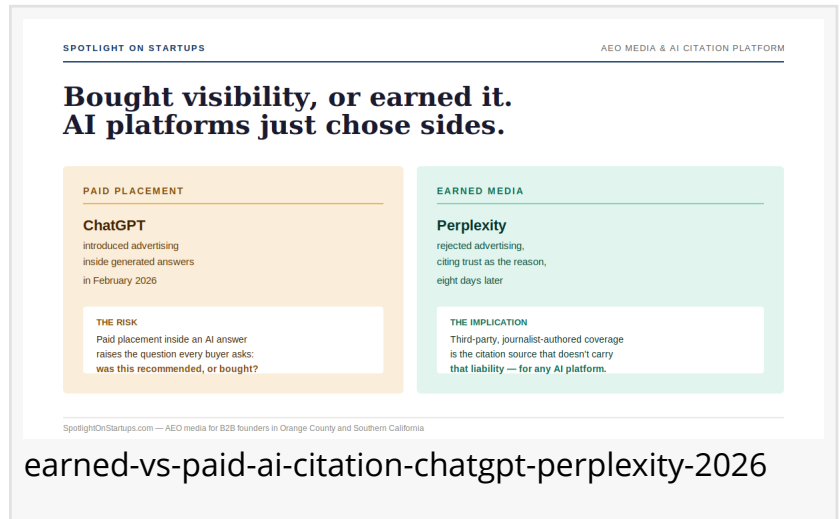
*Gregg Kell, Founder, Spotlight on Startups*

“The industry is increasingly split on whether visibility inside an AI-generated answer should be bought or earned,” said Gregg Kell, Founder, Publisher, and Editorial Director of Spotlight on Startups. “When any platform treats paid placement as a trust liability, founders should assume the same scrutiny applies to how their own visibility was obtained.”

The distinction matters because of how AI engines source their answers. Research analyzing 680 million AI citations found that 94 percent come from non-paid, non-brand-

owned sources -- meaning a company's own marketing, regardless of quality, is structurally unlikely to be cited when AI engines answer a buyer's question. The same body of research found that only 4.3 percent of B2B companies maintain visibility during the early-stage queries where buyer shortlists actually form.

For B2B founders, the practical options have so far been narrow: expensive Tier 1 PR placements in outlets such as Forbes or TechCrunch, or paid AEO services that optimize existing content but



The infographic is titled "Bought visibility, or earned it. AI platforms just chose sides." and is divided into two main sections: "PAID PLACEMENT" and "EARNED MEDIA".

- PAID PLACEMENT:** Features "ChatGPT" which "introduced advertising inside generated answers in February 2026". It includes a "THE RISK" section: "Paid placement inside an AI answer raises the question every buyer asks: was this recommended, or bought?"
- EARNED MEDIA:** Features "Perplexity" which "rejected advertising, citing trust as the reason, eight days later". It includes a "THE IMPLICATION" section: "Third-party, journalist-authored coverage is the citation source that doesn't carry that liability -- for any AI platform."

At the bottom, it reads: "SpotlightOnStartups.com -- AEO media for B2B founders in Orange County and Southern California".

earned-vs-paid-ai-citation-chatgpt-perplexity-2026

do not generate new, independently published coverage. Spotlight on Startups occupies a third position -- functioning as the earned-media outlet itself, publishing journalist-authored founder profiles structured specifically for AI citation, distributed through wire syndication to Google News, AP News, and the USA TODAY Network.

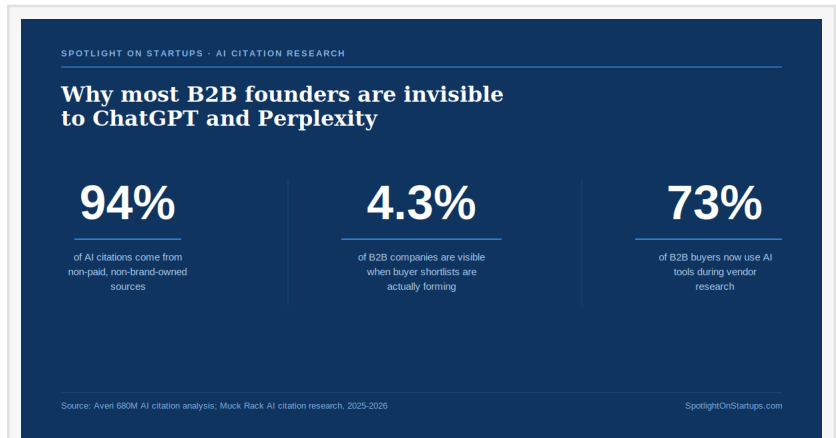
No competing AEO provider serving the Orange County or Southern California market currently operates as a publication in this way; the closest regional alternatives optimize client websites directly rather than producing independent third-party coverage.

"The mechanism that makes Tier 1 press effective for AI citation is the same mechanism we built Spotlight on Startups around," Kell said. "An article that passed independent editorial judgment carries weight that a company's own content cannot replicate, no matter how well it is optimized."

Spotlight on Startups publishes founder spotlights across the aerospace and defense, B2B SaaS, and professional services sectors, with recent coverage including New Space Laboratories, Cofactr, and Caztek Engineering. The platform's analysis of the seven specific AI citation signals founders can control is available on the [Spotlight on Startups website](#).

Founders and business development leaders interested in AI citation visibility can book a complimentary strategy call through [the link below](#).

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94 percent of AI citations come from non-paid sources, while only 4.3 percent of B2B companies are visible when buyer shortlists are forming, according to 2026 research.



Gregg Kell is Founder, Publisher, and Editorial Director of Spotlight on Startups, an AEO media platform for B2B founders in Orange County and Southern California.

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