

Search Rankings and AI Recommendations Are Diverging, Says Clients on Demand Founder Russ Ruffino

Ruffino comments on 2026 industry data showing a widening gap between top Google rankings and the sources AI tools cite when recommending businesses.

SAN DIEGO, CA, UNITED STATES, July 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- For two decades, being found online came down to a single objective: ranking at the top of Google. In 2026, that assumption is under pressure.

A series of analyses published this year by search-analytics firms point to a growing divergence between traditional search rankings and the sources that AI tools cite when answering questions — meaning the page a search engine ranks highest is often not the source an AI recommends to a prospective buyer.

The shift coincides with a change in how people search. Rather than typing short keywords, users increasingly describe a full situation to tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity and ask for a recommendation. Those tools then surface businesses based on how the broader web describes them, not solely on where a website ranks.

Multiple 2026 studies report that a large share of the pages AI tools cite rank on the second page of Google results or lower, and that businesses are more likely to be cited by AI through third-party sources than through their own websites. Separate research indicates that visitors referred by AI tools convert at rates comparable to paid search, arriving already prompted by the tool's recommendation.

Russ Ruffino, founder of the business-coaching company Clients on Demand, said the trend reflects a broader correction.

"For a long time, the advice was always 'more' — more content, more keywords, more platforms," Ruffino said. "What the data increasingly suggests is that the old approach doesn't match how people discover businesses today. When someone asks an AI tool for the best option in their area, it isn't rewarding whoever published the most. It's surfacing whoever the broader web treats as credible. That's a different game, and in many ways a simpler one."

Ruffino said the change may come as a relief to business owners who have spent years chasing algorithm updates.

"The questions that matter now are who a business is genuinely for, what it is actually known for, and whether the open web reflects that accurately," Ruffino said. "When those line up, the AI tends to follow. The work isn't louder. It's clearer."

Ruffino added that the underlying data continues to shift as AI platforms evolve, and cautioned that no single tactic guarantees visibility.

"This is early, and it changes constantly," Ruffino said. "Anyone promising a permanent result is misreading how fast the technology moves. The honest position is that businesses are better off doing a few things well than trying to do everything."

About Russ Ruffino

Clients on Demand is a business-coaching company founded by Russ Ruffino. Ruffino is the author of the forthcoming book "Portable Empire."

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