Mack Media Group Examines Nearly 2 Million AI Citations in Local Search

What Sources Does AI Trust When Recommending Local Businesses? St. Pete Agency Reviews the Data



ST PETERSBURG, FL, UNITED STATES, October 2, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- When a consumer asks ChatGPT, Google AI Mode, or another artificial intelligence platform to recommend a local roofer, dentist, attorney, restaurant, or digital marketing agency, the answer does not necessarily come from one source.

Mack Media Group, an AI digital marketing agency serving St. Petersburg, Florida, analyzed recent local AI-search research covering nearly 2 million citations to examine where AI platforms obtain local business information and what those findings mean for businesses preparing for AI-driven search.

The agency's analysis points toward an important shift in local digital marketing: Businesses are no longer optimizing only for rankings.

They increasingly need to make their information clear, accessible, consistent, and independently supported across the sources AI systems can discover.



Nearly 2 Million Citations Show How Local AI Answers Are Built

A September 2026 BrightLocal study of 200,085 localized searches across ChatGPT, Google AI Mode and Google AI Overviews produced 1,967,762 citations across approximately 1,300 business locations.

One of the strongest findings was the role of first-party business websites.

Approximately 93% of the unique domains cited were individual business websites, while business websites collectively accounted for roughly 42% of all citations analyzed.

Data suggests that the rise of AI search does not eliminate the value of a business website. Instead, websites may increasingly function as source material for AI-generated answers as well as destinations for potential customers.

That aligns with Mack Media Group's own approach to AI search optimization. In its guide, How Businesses Can Become Eligible for ChatGPT Search, the agency recommends that businesses state their services, coverage area and key details plainly on their websites. It also notes that eligibility is not a guarantee of visibility, since no business can force ChatGPT to recommend it.

Business Websites Are Becoming More Important, Not Less

The citation data challenges the assumption that AI answers will make business websites less important. Mack Media Group's AI marketing framework focuses on answer-ready content, entity clarity, topical authority, and structured information so both people and AI systems can interpret what a company does.

Mack Media Group's 2026 SEO guidance for local businesses similarly recommends organized, evidence-based content that answers one primary question clearly, rather than disconnected pages targeting isolated keywords.

Google Business Profile Still Plays a Major Role

Google was responsible for more than 563,000 citations in BrightLocal's analysis, or roughly 28.6% of all citations studied. Google Business Profile therefore remains an important part of the information environment surrounding local businesses.

Mack Media Group's local SEO services include Google Business Profile optimization, which covers:

Accurate business information
Relevant business categories
High-quality images
Ongoing profile updates

The agency describes the profile as playing a critical role in how potential customers find and engage with a brand, and it pairs profile work with citation management to keep name, address, and phone details consistent.

AI search adds another reason for maintaining that information accurately. If multiple systems rely on business information originating from Google or sources that reference it, inconsistent data can create uncertainty about the business's location, services, or identity.

Yelp, Facebook, and Other Third-Party Sources Still Matter
BrightLocal's research also showed significant citation activity outside Google. Among major platforms analyzed:

Yelp generated 187,599 citations.
Facebook generated 43,876 citations.
Tripadvisor generated 35,246 citations.
OpenTable generated 23,237 citations.
AI Search Visibility Needs Its Own Measurement

Traditional SEO reporting commonly focuses on keyword rankings, organic traffic, and conversions. Those metrics remain valuable, but AI search introduces additional signals. Mack Media Group recommends monitoring variables such as:
Brand mentions in relevant AI prompts
URLs cited by AI platforms
Competitors appearing in results
Accuracy of service descriptions
Website citation frequency
Third-party sources supporting answers
AI referral traffic
Calls, forms, chats, and qualified leads

Mack Media Group advises against treating one successful AI response as proof of lasting visibility, since outputs vary across prompts, locations, and time. The agency emphasizes differentiating metrics, as citations, referral visits, and qualified leads represent distinct outcomes while companies integrate AI search measurement with traditional SEO.

AI Optimization Does Not Replace Local SEO
One of the clearest conclusions from the citation research is that AI visibility builds on traditional

local SEO. Keyword rankings still matter, but Mack Media Group notes that businesses should also track AI citations, brand searches, Google Business Profile interactions, calls and qualified conversions.

For local businesses, that means AI search optimization should extend rather than replace established fundamentals:

A technically accessible website
Clear service pages
Strong local relevance
Accurate Google Business Profile information
Useful reviews
Consistent business data
Authoritative third-party mentions
Evidence-based content

Together, those signals create a clearer digital identity across both traditional and AI-powered search environments.

The New Question: Can AI Verify the Business?

For years, businesses have asked, "How do we rank higher?" As AI search expands, Mack Media Group believes another question is becoming equally important: "Can an AI system clearly understand and verify who we are?"

AI visibility requires more than keywords. Consistent business information across websites, Google Business Profiles, reviews, directories, news, and other trusted sources helps AI understand a company's services, expertise, and location.

Mack Media Group describes this as improving entity clarity and the information environment around the business, rather than attempting to manipulate AI recommendations.

What St. Petersburg Businesses Should Consider

For St. Petersburg companies preparing for 2027, the data points to five priorities:

Make the website a clear first-party source. Keep business information accurate and easy to understand.
Keep Google Business Profiles current. Update key details whenever they change.
Identify relevant third-party sources. Track directories, publications, review sites, and industry platforms tied to your search category.

Test customer prompts across AI platforms. Check visibility in ChatGPT, Google AI Mode, and similar tools.
Measure AI and search visibility separately. Strong rankings do not always translate to strong AI visibility.

Businesses cannot guarantee that AI systems will cite or recommend them, but they can make their information clearer, more current, and easier to verify.

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