

Publication status

This is a publication-ready pilot study framework. It deliberately does not invent survey results. The first edition establishes the research design, CJ's verified baseline observations, and the data collection system needed to publish statistically meaningful small-business findings.

Executive Summary

AI-driven discovery is changing how small businesses are found. Traditional rankings still matter, but visibility now also includes whether a business is mentioned, cited, recommended, or used as a source in AI-generated answers. This study is designed to measure that broader visibility in a repeatable way.

The pilot demonstrates an important distinction: search visibility and AI citation visibility are related but not identical. A page can receive AI citations even when traditional search traffic is modest. CJ Design & Consulting's September 2026 Bing AI Performance review, for example, recorded two citations from one CJ article while query-level grounding detail was not available.

Research Questions

1. How often are small businesses visible across Google, Bing, ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Gemini, and Perplexity for commercially relevant questions?
2. Which website characteristics are associated with stronger search and AI visibility?
3. Are businesses more likely to be cited when content contains direct answers, clear entity information, evidence, structured headings, and original expertise?
4. How strongly do traditional search visibility, referring-domain authority, local signals, and AI citations move together?
5. Which improvements produce the largest measurable visibility gains over 90 days?

Recommended Study Design

Component	Recommended design
Sample	50–100 U.S. small and midsize businesses across 5–10 service categories.
Prompt set	20 standardized prompts per business: brand, service, local, comparison, problem/solution, and expert-information prompts.
Platforms	Google Search, Bing Search, ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Gemini, and Perplexity.
Observation windows	Baseline, Day 30, Day 60, Day 90.
Search measures	Indexed status, impressions, clicks, average position, branded/nonbranded visibility.
AI measures	Mention, citation, recommendation, cited URL, citation frequency, and platform.
Authority measures	Referring domains, reputable third-party mentions, reviews, entity consistency, expert attribution.
Content measures	Direct answers, topical depth, FAQs, evidence, original data, freshness, internal links, schema accuracy.

Pilot Baseline: CJ Design & Consulting

Observed signal	September 2026 baseline
Google Search Console	8 clicks, 8.89K impressions, 0.1% CTR, average position 74.1 over the reviewed 3-month window.
Bing Search Performance	1 click and 11 impressions in the reviewed 3-month view.
Bing AI Performance	2 citations from one page in the reviewed 3-month view.
Cited CJ page	/diversify-your-traffic-sources-beyond-google/
Bing referring domains	7 referring domains shown during the audit.
Technical foundation	Sitemaps, robots.txt, HTTPS, IndexNow and major indexing categories reviewed; several page-level title/meta/heading/alt issues corrected.

Hypotheses to Test

- Businesses with clear service/entity descriptions and strong topical focus will appear more consistently in both search and AI answers.
- Pages containing original evidence, examples, benchmarks, or expert interpretation will earn more citations than generic explanatory content.
- Independent third-party mentions will correlate with stronger visibility, particularly for competitive commercial and local queries.
- Technical eligibility is necessary but insufficient; authority and content usefulness will explain more of the difference between merely indexed pages and visible/cited pages.

Data Collection Sheet

Field	Example coding
Business / URL	Company name + canonical URL
Prompt ID	LOCAL-01
Platform	Copilot
Date	YYYY-MM-DD
Visible?	Yes/No
Mentioned?	Yes/No
Cited?	Yes/No
Recommended?	Yes/No
Cited URL	Exact URL
Competitors cited	Names/domains
Notes	Context and answer type

How CJ Can Publish the First Full Edition

1. Recruit the study sample and freeze the business list before baseline collection.
1. Use the same prompt set, location assumptions, date window, and scoring rules for every business.
2. Capture screenshots or exports where platform terms permit and preserve raw observations.
3. Separate observed data from interpretation.
4. Publish aggregate results only after the sample is large enough to support the claims being made.
5. Repeat the study quarterly or annually to create a proprietary trend series.

Sources and Research Basis

External methodology references:

- Google Search Central, AI features and your website:
<https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features>
- Bing Webmaster Guidelines: <https://www.bing.com/webmasters/help/webmaster-guidelines-30fba23a>
- Bing Webmaster Tools, AI Performance: <https://www.bing.com/webmasters/help/ai-performance-9f8e7d6c>
- Microsoft Bing Webmaster Blog, Introducing AI Performance in Bing Webmaster Tools (February 10, 2026): <https://blogs.bing.com/webmaster/February-2026/Introducing-AI-Performance-in-Bing-Webmaster-Tools-Public-Preview>

CJ-specific baseline observations in these documents are based on CJ Design & Consulting's September 2026 Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools review. They are internal observations, not industry-wide statistics.