



2026
LOCAL
DISCOVERY
INDEX



The Verification Loop

How Consumers Discover Local Brands Across
Search, Social, AI, and Reviews

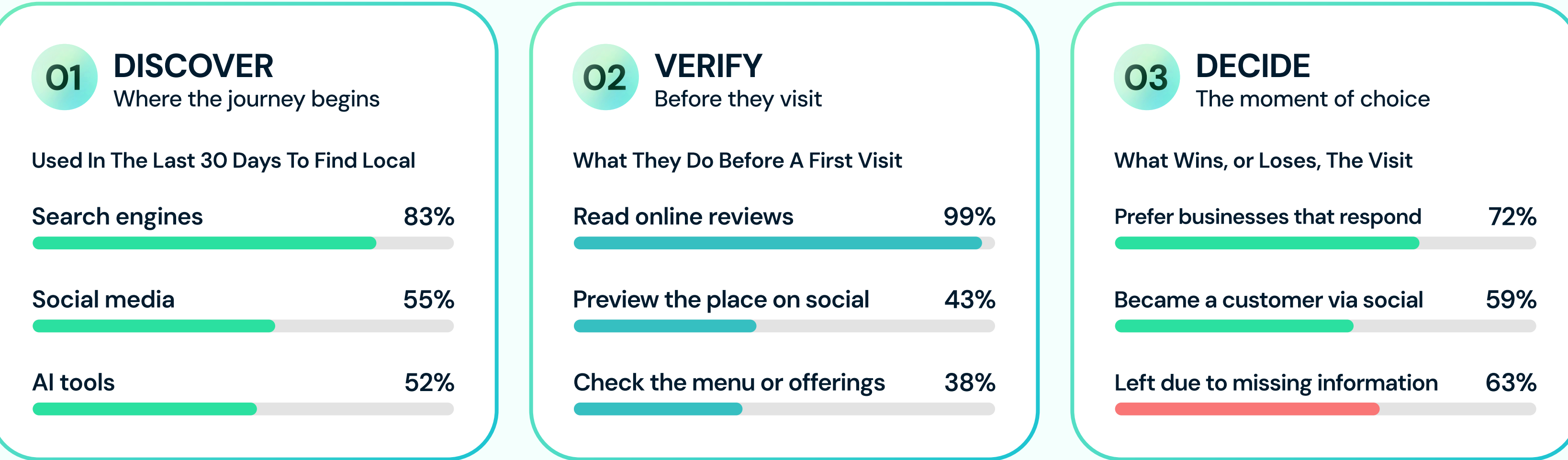
Executive Summary

The Verification Loop

Local discovery no longer runs in a straight line. For multi-location brands, this is the single most important shift in this year's edition of our annual consumer report. Consumers do not move down a funnel from awareness to decision. **Instead, they run through a loop:** they discover a business in one place, verify it in another, and only then decide. Often, this process takes place within a few minutes and across multiple channels.

The findings describe one connected loop, not a sequence of stages. Consumers discover across multiple channels at once: **83% use search, 55% use social, and 52% use AI to research a local business.** They verify before committing: 99% read reviews and 43% preview the place on social media. And they choose on a combination of signals: 72% favor businesses that respond to reviews, 59% have become a customer because of a social post, and 63% have walked away when a business could not answer a question they needed. There is no single entry point to own and no orderly hand-off to manage. A consumer might meet your brand in an AI answer, judge it by its most recent reviews, and decide from a social video, in any order.

Consumers Move Through Multiple Channels Before They Choose.



No Channel Wins Alone.

Search and AI spark discovery. Reviews and social confirm trust. Responsiveness and social proof close the deal.

The loop exists because no single source is both complete and trusted. AI is fast but fallible. Reviews are credible but scattered. Search is comprehensive but unfiltered. So consumers triangulate, moving from one source to the next to build enough confidence to act. For a leader responsible for local visibility at scale, the implication is direct: **winning is not about dominating one channel. It is about being present, accurate, and consistent everywhere the loop touches,** because a break at any single point hands the customer to a competitor whose chain is intact.

The State Of Local Discovery

Three Years of Tracking Local Discovery

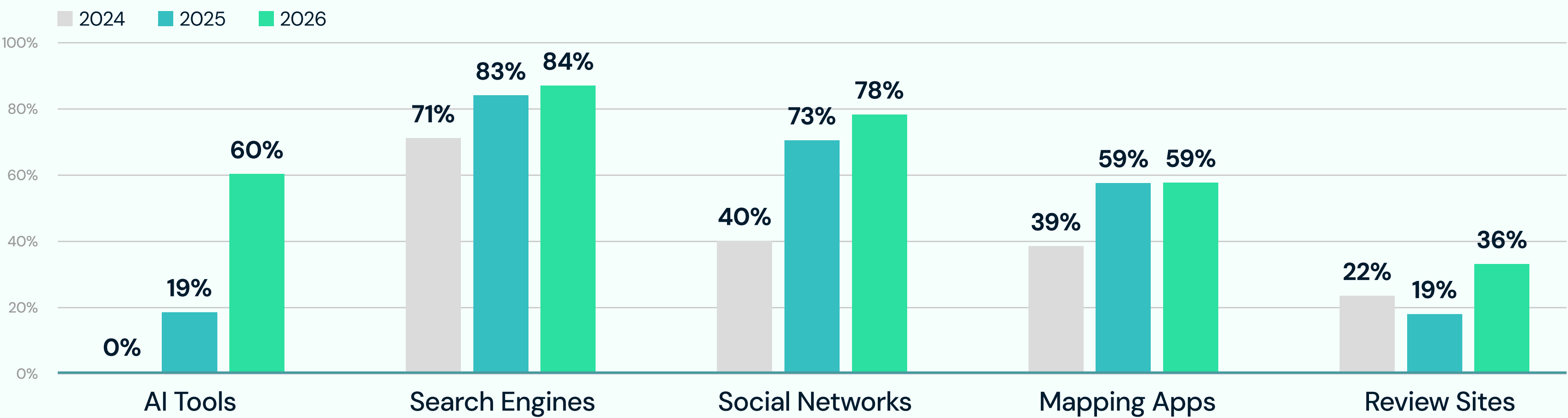
SOCi's Local Discovery Index (LDI) – formerly known as the Consumer Behavior Index – asks U.S. consumers how they really find, evaluate, and choose local businesses online. Our third annual report finds a journey with no straight line left in it. Search engines, social networks, and review sites now share the stage with AI, a firmly established fourth channel, and consumers move across all four in any order. Rather than move through a tidy funnel, they cross check what they find in one place against the others before they commit. For brands trying to be found, the old playbook no longer applies.

Because the LDI, first released in 2024, has now run for three consecutive years, we can see how consumer behavior is actually shifting, not just where it stands today. By far the most dramatic change is the growth of AI. In 2024, AI tools were still in an early adoption cycle; search capability was only added to ChatGPT late in the year, and very few consumers were using it for local discovery. By the first half of 2025, when we released our second study, roughly 19% of consumers had conducted a search using AI. Now in 2026, we've reached a tipping point, with 60% of consumers using AI as a frequent discovery channel. This represents a rise from zero to a majority of consumers in just two years.

Though search engines remain the anchor of information discovery (84% and climbing), consumers are now utilizing more channels than in prior years. AI now takes its place alongside search and social, establishing a complex, cross channel purchase journey for the typical consumer.

Discovery Channels Used, 2024 to 2026

Share of consumers using each channel at least monthly (not necessarily limited to local search)



AI search wasn't even an option in 2024; in just two years, it has become a majority behavior, with 60% using AI tools at least monthly and 52% using them for local search and discovery.

Takeaway 01: AI Has Transitioned From Novelty To Habit

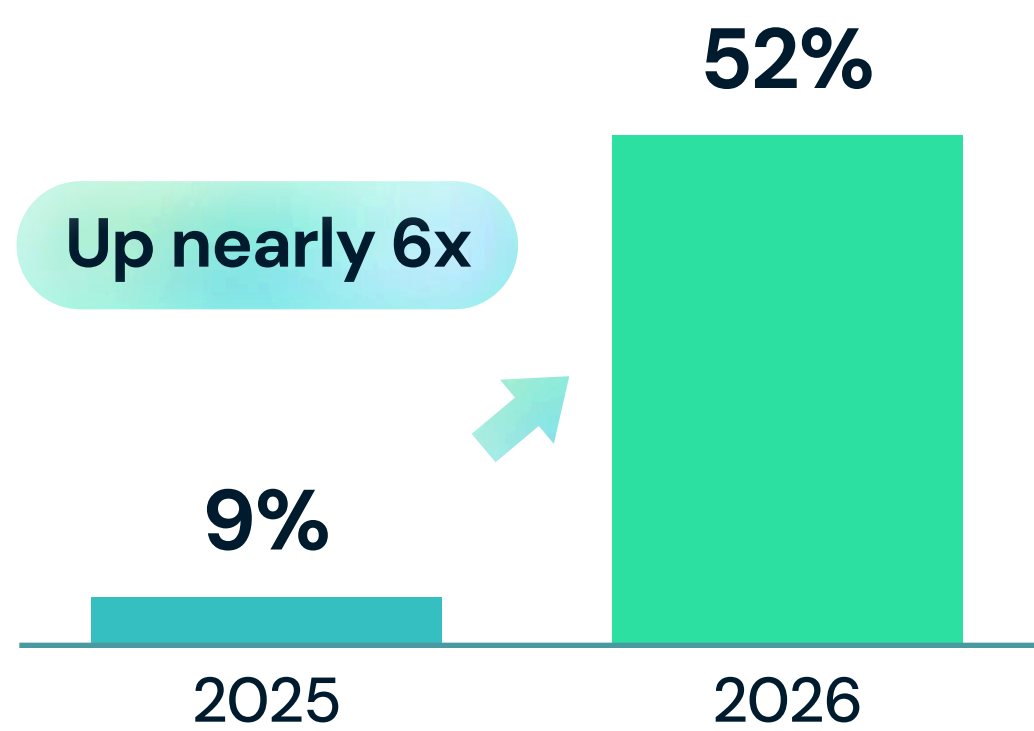
The Findings

AI has made a notable transition from a tool consumers experiment with to something they rely on. Our findings show that 52% of consumers now use AI tools to find local businesses specifically, and those that used AI previously now use them 39% more than they did a year ago, making AI the fastest-rising channel in the study. For multi-location brands, the consequence is direct: for many searches, the first thing a consumer sees is an AI-written answer, whether featured above the links in a search result or presented independently in an AI interface. If your locations are missing or inaccurate in that answer, you can lose the customer before consideration even begins.

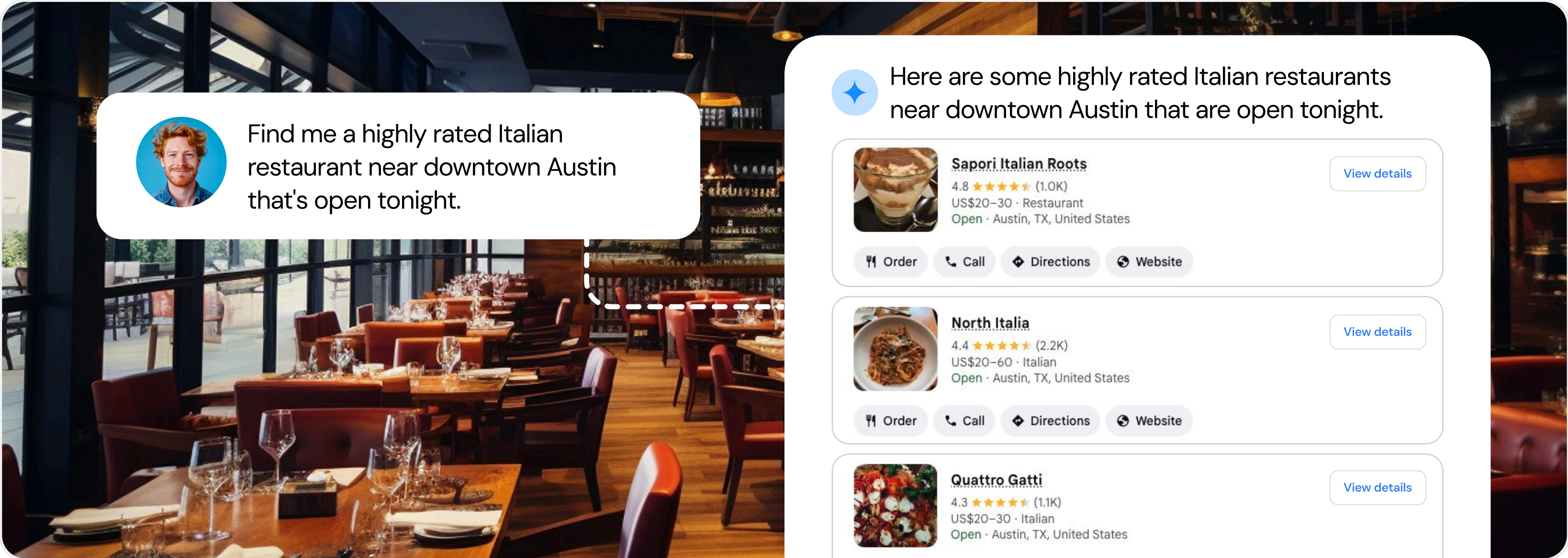
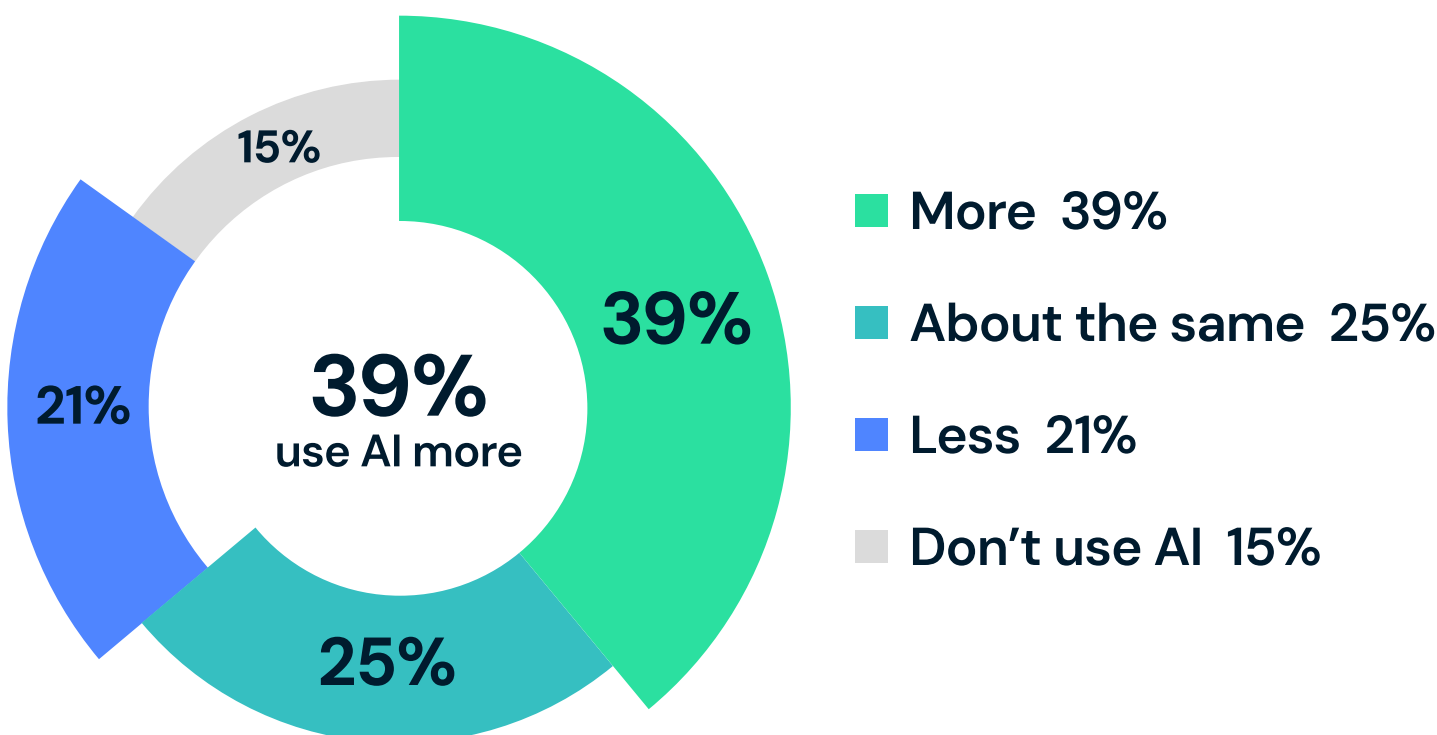
The Rise of AI in Local Discovery

How consumers adopted AI as a channel to find local businesses

Used AI To Find A Local Business, Last 30 Days



How AI Usage Changed vs. A Year Ago

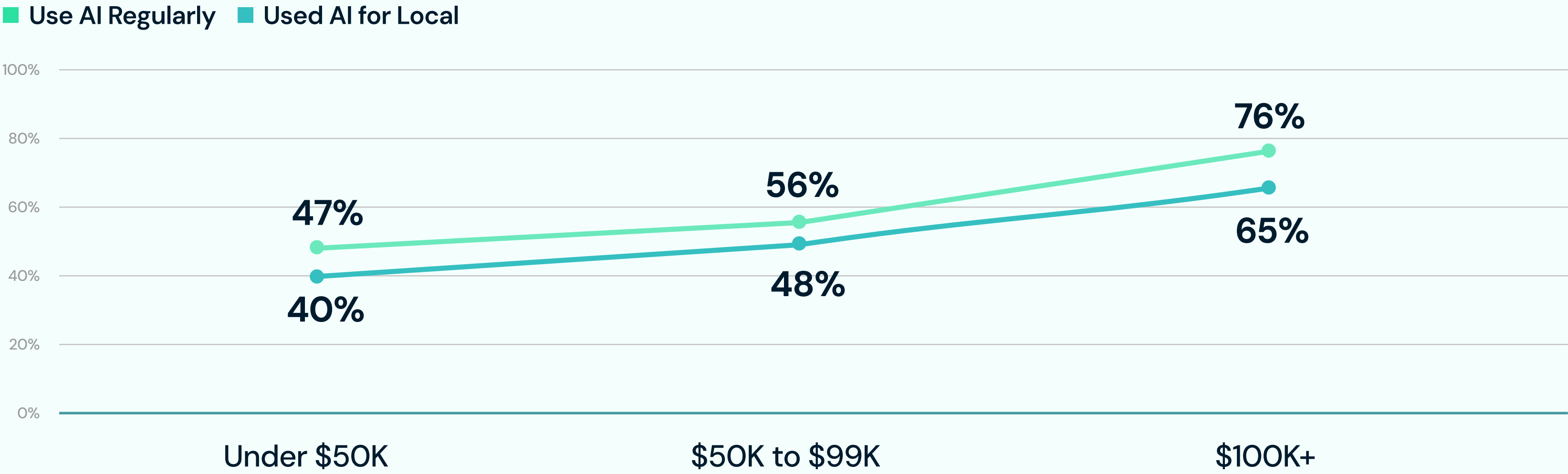


Affluent Consumers Favor AI

Adoption of AI tools skews by income: regular AI use rises from 47% of consumers earning under \$50,000 to 76% of those earning \$100,000 or more. For brands serving high income customers, AI visibility is already a present tense priority, not a future one.

AI Adoption for Local Discovery Rises with Income

Share using AI tools, by household income



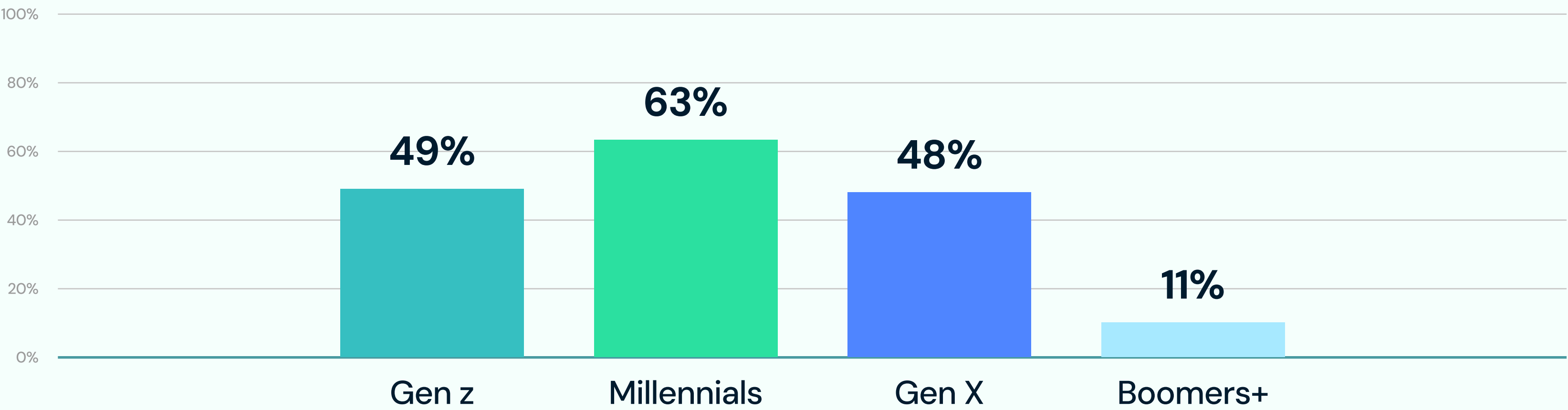
Higher-income consumers are the earliest adopters of AI for local decisions.

Millennials, Not Gen Z, Are the AI Power Users

Adoption of AI splits just as sharply by age, though not in the way marketers may assume. It is Millennials, not Gen Z, who lead: 63% of Millennials have used an AI tool to research a local business in the last 30 days, ahead of Gen Z (49%) and Gen X (48%), and far ahead of Baby Boomers (11%). The shape is a curve, not a straight line, cresting with the digitally fluent, high-spending core of the market and falling off steeply after 65. For brands, the implication is that AI visibility matters most for the Millennial and Gen X customers who are actively in the market and have money to spend.

AI Adoption by Generation

Share who used an AI tool to find or research a local business in the last 30 days, by generation



AI use for local discovery peaks with Millennials, not Gen Z, and drops off sharply after 65.

AI Has Become Inevitable in the Customer Journey

In local discovery as in many other search contexts, consumers interact with AI in two ways: they seek it out deliberately, and they encounter it as a default in the platforms they use regularly. On the active side, 52% of consumers used an AI tool to research a local business in the last 30 days, most often a chat assistant like ChatGPT (57%) or Gemini (51%). On the passive side, AI now shows up in the sites and apps consumers already use, with 51% seeing an AI answer at the top of Google, 35% pulled into Google's AI Mode, and roughly a third encountering AI in mapping apps and social feeds. AI has moved beyond a small cadre of tech forward users and has become, whether by choice or by design, a part of everyone's toolkit.

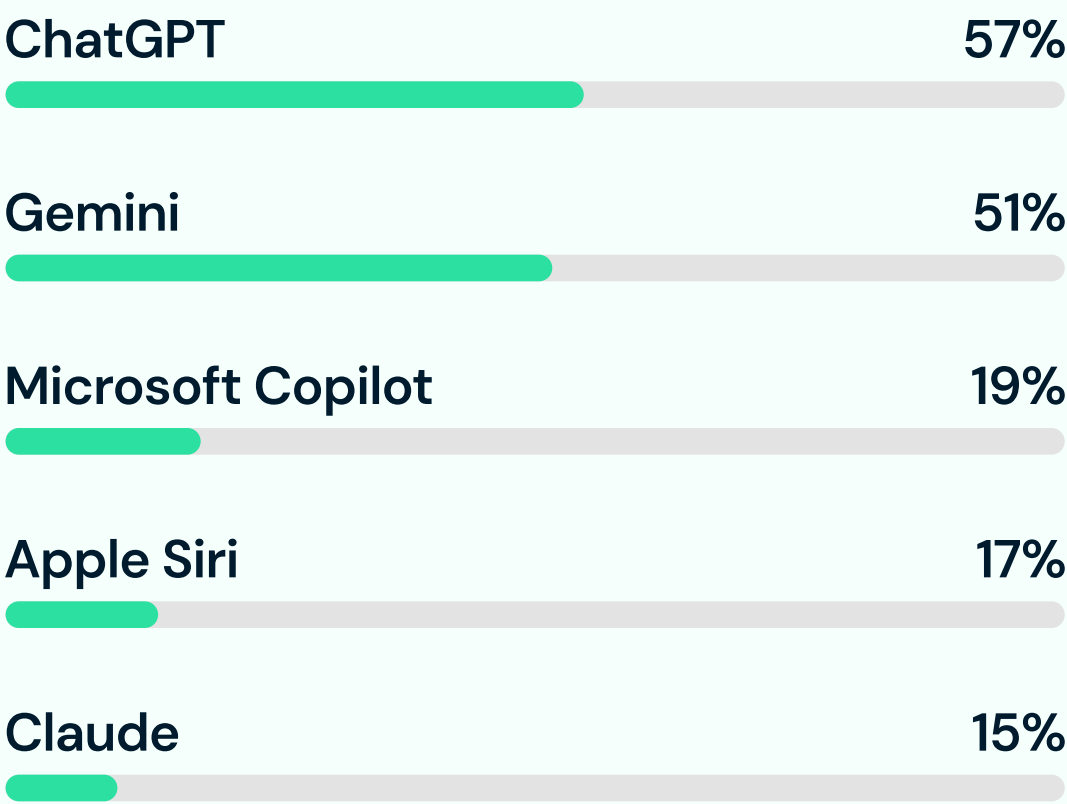
Two Sides Of AI In Local Discovery

Assistants they open and query

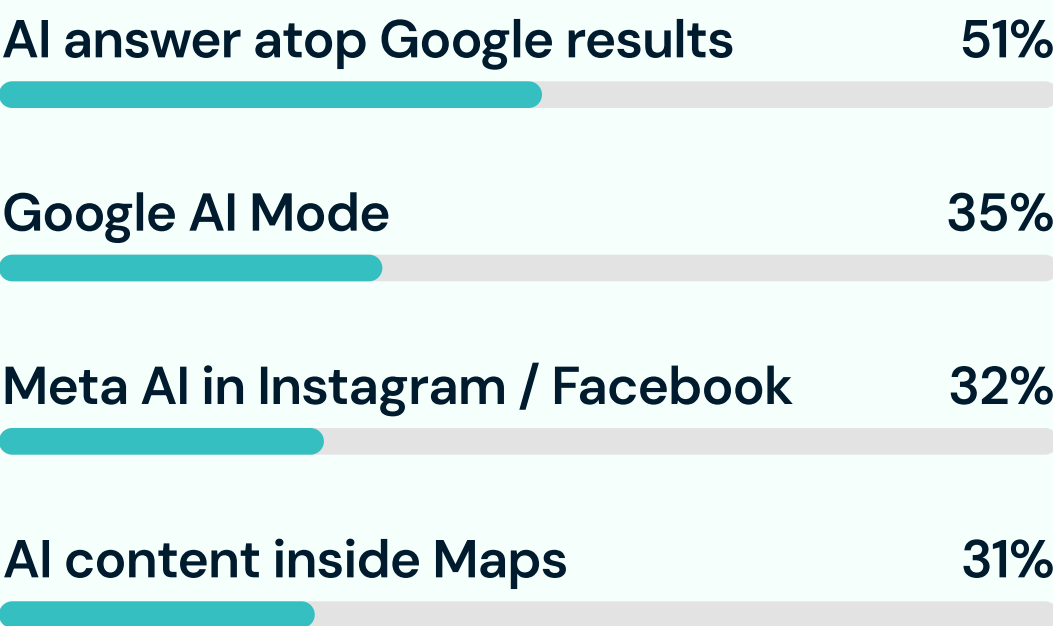
52%

used an AI tool to research a local business in the last 30 days

The AI Consumers Seek Out
Most-Used Assistants



Most Commonly Encountered AI
AI Met Inside Search, Maps And Social



When Consumers Seek Out AI

what is the most famous bakery in New York?

Absolutely. New York City has an incredible bakery scene, so there isn't one bakery that everyone agrees is *the* most famous. But if you're visiting NYC for the first time, **Levain Bakery** is **probably the most iconic place to start**, especially if you love cookies.

🍪 **1. Levain Bakery — Upper West Side**
★ 4.7 • Bakery • Open
🌐 Website • ↗ Directions • 📞 (917) 464-3769

Levain Bakery is one of the bakeries most strongly associated with New York City. It became famous for its **huge, thick cookies that are crispy on the outside and soft and almost gooey in the center**. The bakery started on the Upper West Side in the 1990s, and its cookies eventually became famous far beyond New York.

The signature order is the **Chocolate Chip Walnut Cookie**. It's extremely rich, so one cookie is easily big enough to share. If you don't like walnuts, try one of their chocolate-heavy cookies instead.

The Upper West Side location on **West 74th Street** is the one I'd choose because it gives you more of the classic Levain experience. Current listings show a 4.7/5 rating from more than 7,000 reviews. ⌚ Time Out ...

What to get: Chocolate Chip Walnut Cookie

When AI Finds Consumers

italian restaurant in boston

AI Mode All Images Forums Videos Short videos Shopping More Tools

AI Overview

Boston features renowned Italian dining spanning historic [The North End](#) red-sauce joints to modern regional hotspots [Boston Magazine](#). Top-rated choices include [Mamma Maria](#) for upscale dining, [Carmelina's](#) for Sicilian comfort classics, [Tonino](#) for top-ranked house-made pastas, and [SRV](#) for Venetian style. 📍 Meet Boston +5

Top Traditional Spots (North End)



Mamma Maria
4.7 ★★★★★ (2.2K)
US\$50-100 • Italian
Open • North End

Call

Directions

Website

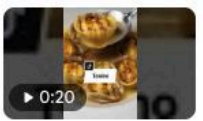
Elegant fine dining with local seasonal ingredients in a historic townhouse.



Carmelina's
4.6 ★★★★★ (2.9K)
US\$30-60 • Italian
Open • North End

TikTok • bell_eats

Tonino: Boston's Top Italian Restaurant & Deli...
Apr 5, 2026 — come with us to the number one rated...



Boston Magazine

These Are the Best Italian Restaurants in Boston Right Now
Jan 15, 2024 — These Are the Best Italian Restaurants in Boston Right Now • Bar...



The Infatuation

The 17 Best Italian Restaurants in Boston - The Infatuation
Jul 9, 2026 — The Best Italian Restaurants in Boston • Giulia, 1682 Massachusetts Ave...



Show all

✓ The Action Item

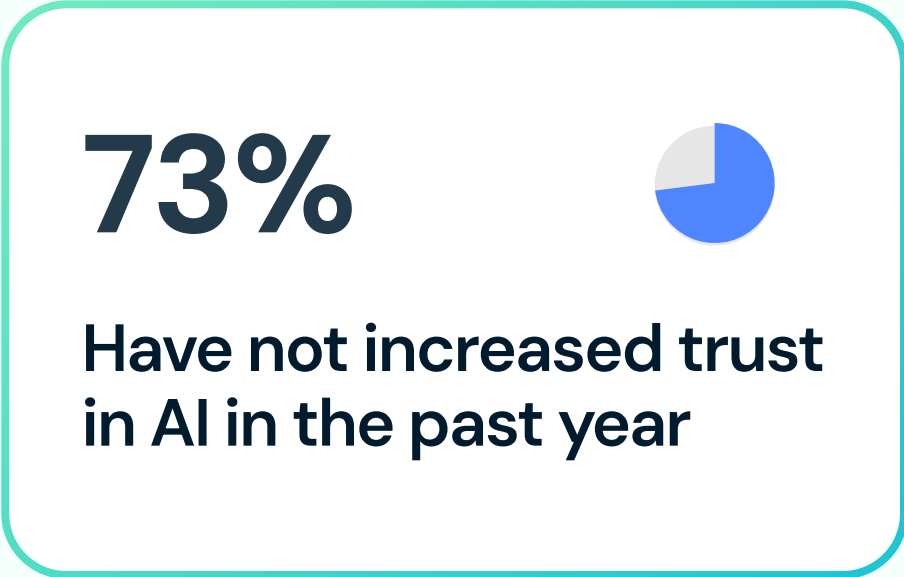
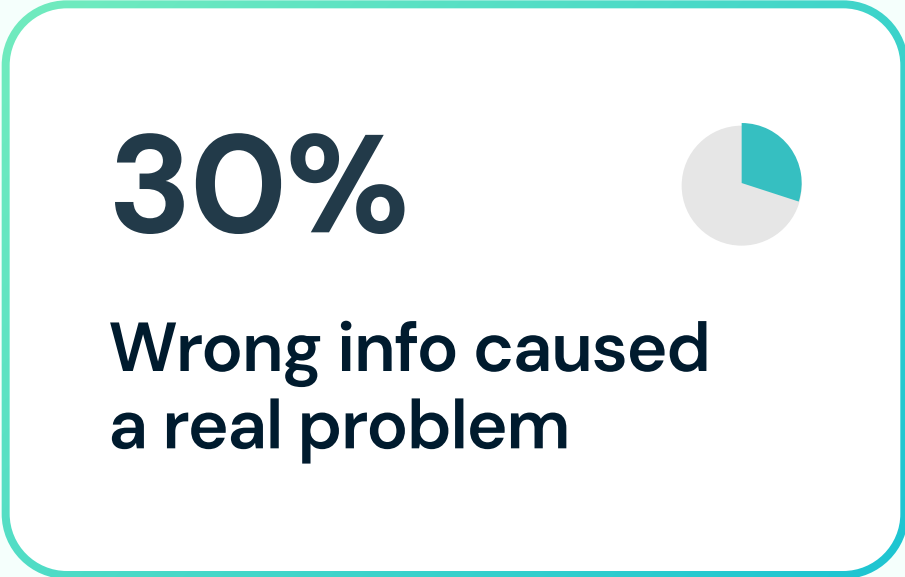
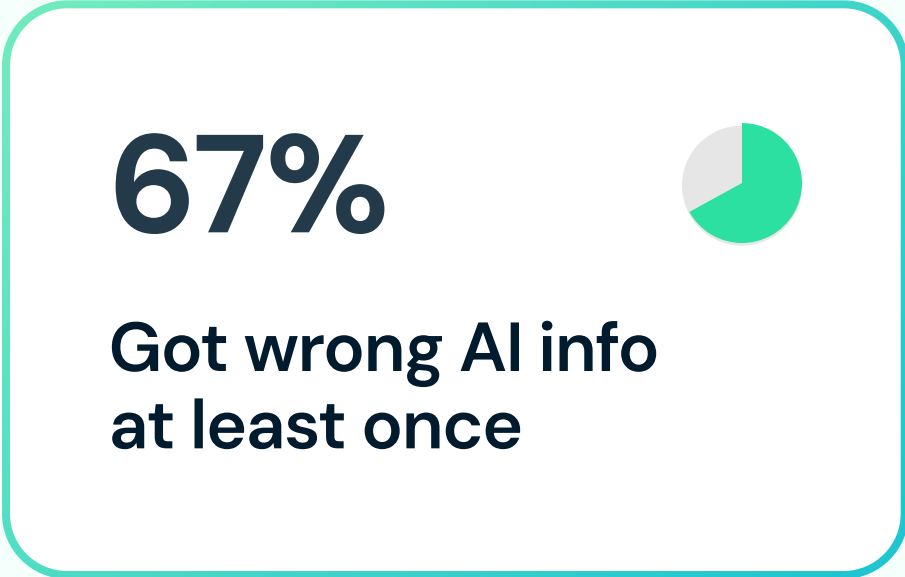
Treat AI answers as a channel you can win, not a black box. Audit how your locations appear in AI results today, prioritize the structured data AI engines pull from (hours, services, categories, attributes), and monitor for the inaccuracies two-thirds of users are already encountering. The brands that feed AI clean, consistent information will be favored; the ones that do not will be misrepresented or left out. See how SOCi's [Local Search Agent](#) keeps every location's signals accurate across the engines AI relies on.

Takeaway 02 : AI Has A Trust Problem

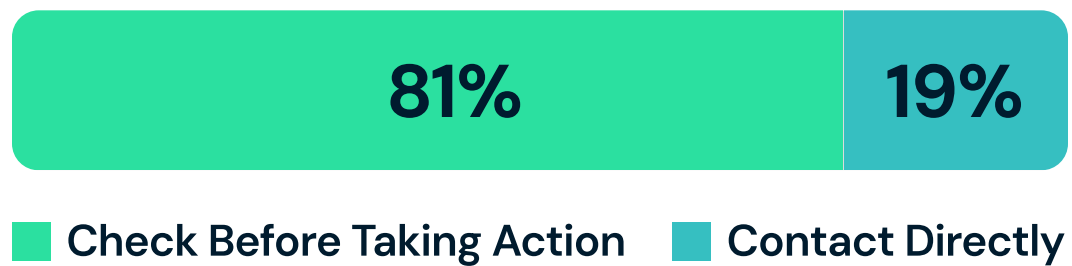
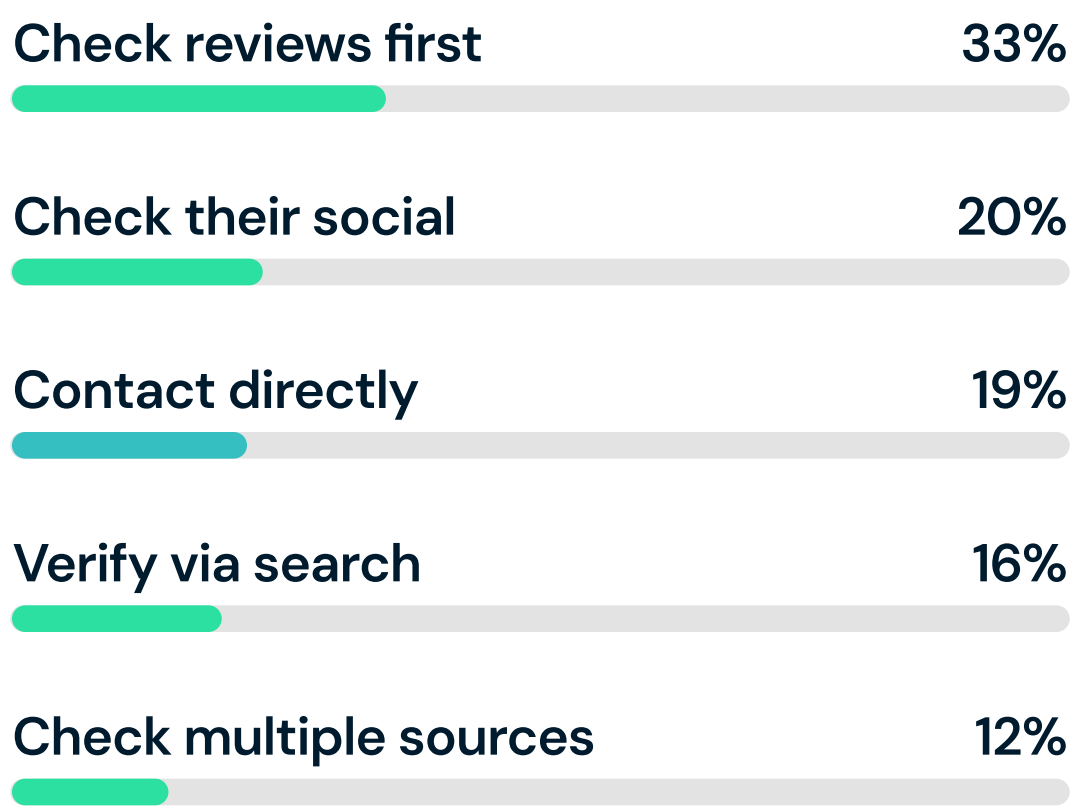
The Findings

Consumers are leaning on AI while remaining skeptical about its reliability. Among those who use AI, a remarkably high 67% say a tool has given them wrong information about a local business at least once, and 30% say that bad information caused a real problem. Only 27% say they trust AI more than they did a year ago, meaning 73% have not increased their trust in AI in the past year. Because of this gap between usage and trust, more than 8 in 10 consumers take an additional step before contacting a business directly.

AI Users Reporting Wrong Local Business Info, And Consumers Whose Trust In AI Grew



After An AI Tool Recommends A Business, What Do You Do Next?



AI is everywhere, but shortage of trust means AI platforms are rarely used in isolation. They start a verification loop. After seeing an AI-powered local recommendation, the most common next step (33%) is to check the reviews on Google or another site. 20% look at the business's social media to learn more, 19% visit or contact the business directly, and 16% search the name to confirm details. AI is a powerful first impression, but consumers still cross check it against the rest of your presence before they commit. A brand that shows up well in AI, but has thin reviews or a stale social feed, could lose the customer at the verification step.

For 81% Of Consumers, An AI Recommendation Leads To More Checking—Not Direct Contact.

✓ The Action Item

Do not treat AI as a silo, and do not assume winning the AI answer wins the customer. Because consumers verify AI recommendations against reviews and social, your AI visibility is only as strong as the proof behind it. Cover the moment after the AI answer: current reviews with owner responses, an active local social presence, and details that survive a fact-check. SOCi's Reputation Agent keeps reviews current and responded to at every location, and SOCi's Social Agent keeps social media pages active and consistent, so the proof holds up wherever consumers go to verify.

Takeaway 03 : Social Is The #2 Search Engine

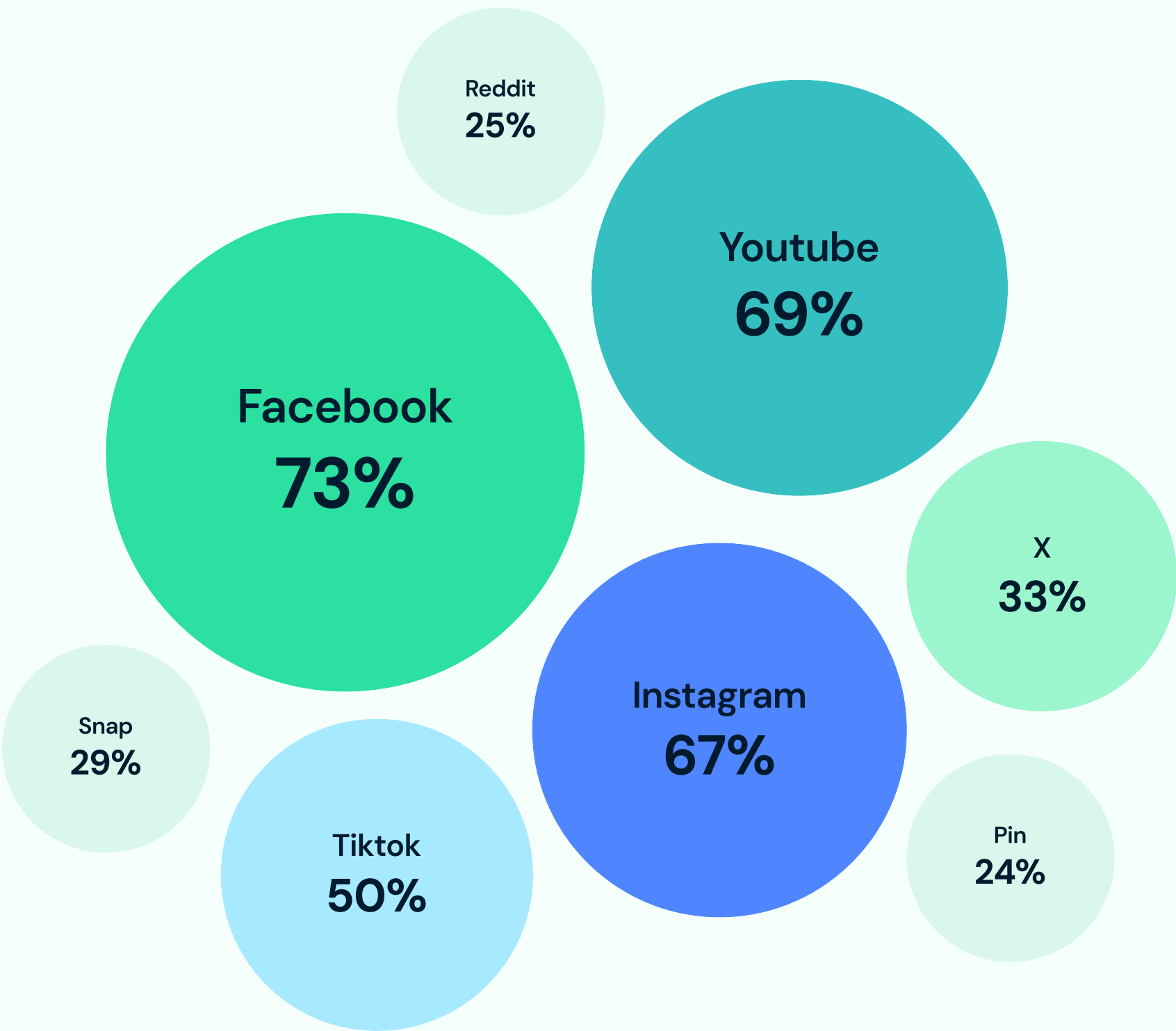
The Findings

The line between social and search has effectively dissolved for a significant number of consumers. Consumers are not just using social networking sites for entertainment or interpersonal connection; they use social media to discover and vet local businesses, with 55% turning to social for local recommendations and 43% using social to preview what a place is actually like before they go. And when consumers turn to social media, they are not confined to a single app. Among consumers who use social media to find local businesses, Facebook (73%) and YouTube (69%) lead the pack, with Instagram close behind (67%) and TikTok used by half (50%). X, Snapchat, Reddit, and Pinterest also garner a significant share of users.

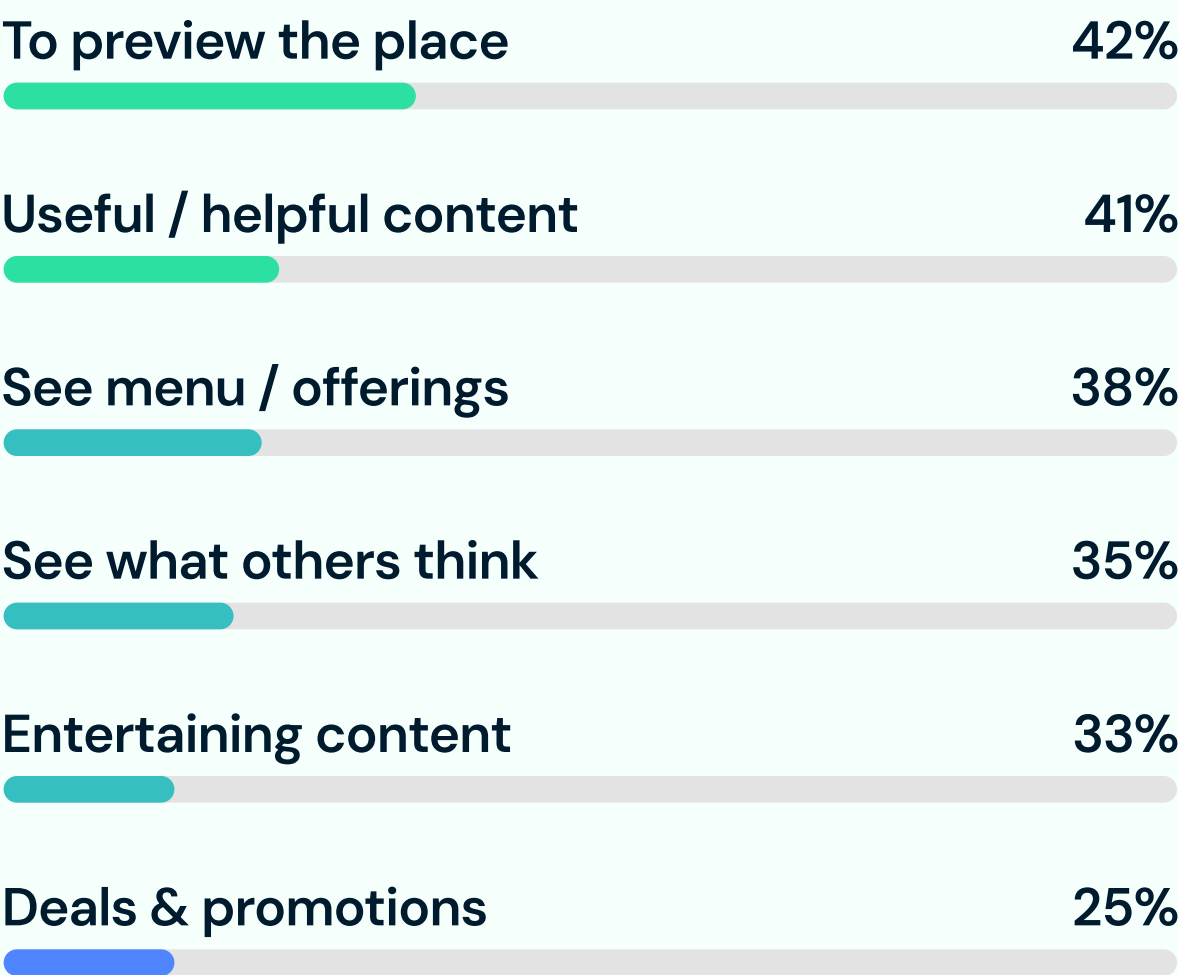
The two most-used channels are not the trendiest ones; they are the established, high reach workhorses. More consumers use Facebook to find local businesses than any other platform (73%), with YouTube close behind at 69%, ahead of Instagram (67%) and TikTok (50%). YouTube's second-place finish points to real appetite for video that shows consumers what a place is like before they commit, from walkthroughs to real customer footage. TikTok still reaches half of social searchers, but it skews sharply younger, and it is the one platform Gen Z favors over Facebook. The right platform, in other words, depends partly on who a brand is trying to reach.

Social Media Is Where Local Discovery Happens

Platforms Used To Discover Local Businesses • % of Social Searchers



Why Consumers Follow Local Brands

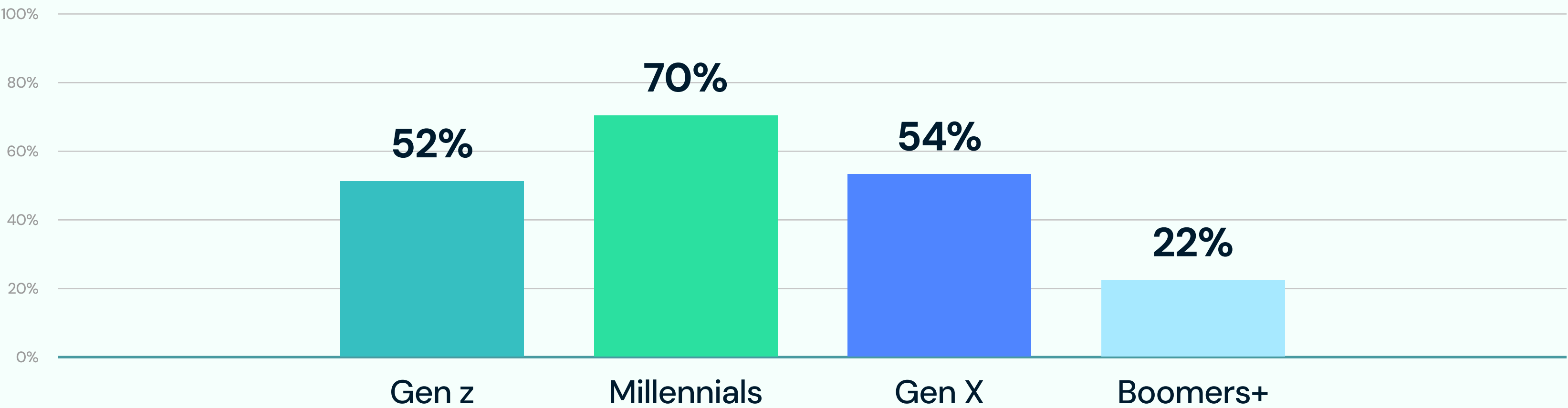


Social Converts, And It Is Not Just A Young Consumer Story

59% of consumers say a social post or video has directly made them a customer of a local business. That behavior peaks with Millennials at 70%, and holds above half for Gen X (54%) and Gen Z (52%), dropping off only among Boomers (22%). Social discovery is now the norm for the core of the spending population. For enterprise brands, that makes social a local proposition, not just a national one: localized, store-level content is what moves a consumer from scrolling to visiting.

Became a Customer of a Local Business From a Social Post or Video

Share who say social content converted them, by generation



✓ The Action Item

Ensure your brand has a social presence at the local level, with a profile on key platforms for every location. Prioritize local, store-level content (real photos, staff, offers, community moments) over purely national brand posts, and focus first on the Millennial and Gen X audiences who convert at the highest rates. SOCi's Social Agent keeps every location posting locally relevant content at scale.

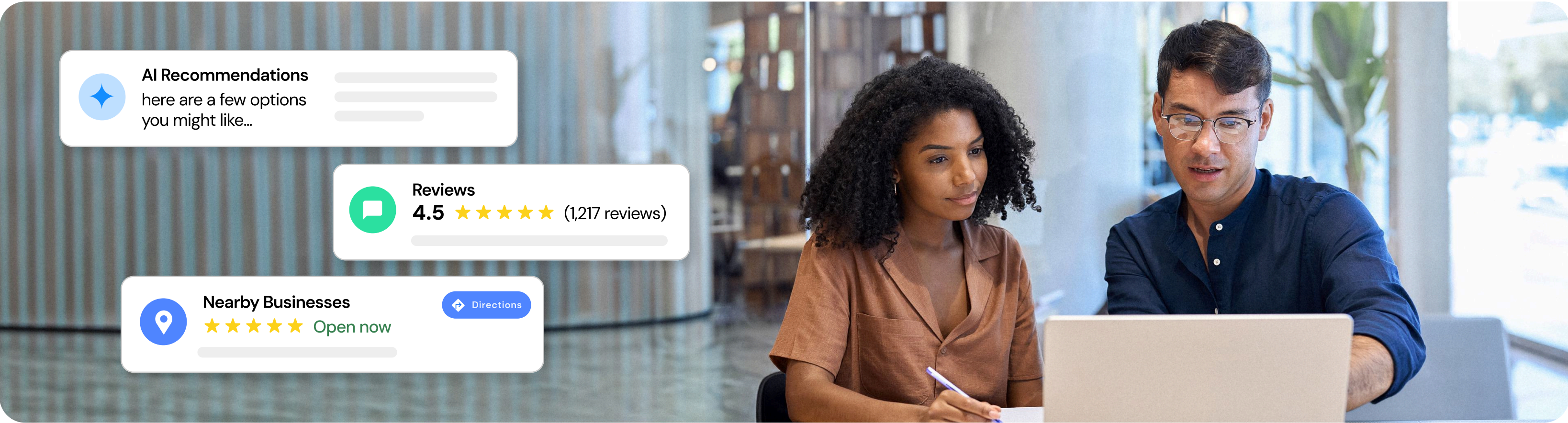


Local Content
Doesn't Just Engage.
It Converts.

Takeaway 04 : Category Shapes The Journey

The Findings

Consumers favor different channels and types of information depending on the category of business they're looking for. The discovery itself has two distinct moments worth planning for separately: where consumers start, and the factor or factors that help them make a final choice.



Where Consumers Start, By Industry

Search leads as the most popular starting point in every category, but the second-place channel varies. Interestingly, AI-first journeys are highest in healthcare (21%) and grocery (19%), whereas social over-indexes for banking and insurance (20%). Somewhat more predictably, mapping apps are a popular first choice for fuel and auto searches (25%). It's worth noting the low scores for vertical sites like Hotels.com for hospitality or Zillow for property; consumers seem to be indicating a preference for one-size-fits-all solutions as opposed to industry specific providers.

Where Consumers START Their Search, By Category

Share of searchers beginning on each channel (by business type)

	Search	AI	Social	Maps	Reviews	Vertical
Restaurants	40%	17%	12%	14%	12%	6%
Hospitality	34%	17%	14%	11%	12%	13%
Retail	44%	17%	12%	12%	10%	4%
Healthcare	45%	21%	12%	6%	10%	5%
Financial	48%	16%	20%	4%	8%	3%
Grocery	42%	19%	12%	14%	8%	4%
Fuel / Auto	37%	16%	11%	25%	8%	2%
Property	53%	11%	15%	3%	7%	11%

Search leads everywhere, but AI-first journeys run highest in healthcare and grocery.

The Factors That Determine The Final Choice

The factors that determine a consumer's final decision also change by vertical, forming a clear pattern. Reviews and word of mouth are the near-universal baseline, leading in five of the eight categories, from restaurants (41%) and hospitality (40%) to healthcare (38%) and financial services (36%). But the tiebreaker is industry specific in other cases: consumers want to see before they commit in experiential categories (visual content tops property at 43%), whereas they want practical details like cost, distance, and hours in convenience categories (grocery 37%, fuel 36%). They want credibility in trust-sensitive categories (brand, staff credentials, and certifications spike for financial services at 34%). Tellingly, AI and search recommendations rank among the top factors in healthcare (33%), the highest-research category, a sign consumers are turning to AI recommendations when making complex decisions.

The Decision Factors That Matter Most, By Category

Share citing each factor as most impactful (by business type).

	Reviews & Word of Mouth	Visual Content	Location & Hours	Offerings & Deals	Brand & Credentials	AI Recommendations
Restaurants	41%	28%	32%	37%	24%	27%
Hospitality	40%	30%	35%	36%	30%	29%
Retail	36%	23%	34%	32%	21%	26%
Healthcare	38%	18%	34%	29%	32%	33%
Financial	36%	14%	26%	34%	34%	24%
Grocery	30%	21%	37%	33%	22%	25%
Fuel / Auto	26%	18%	36%	33%	21%	22%
Property	38%	43%	33%	26%	19%	25%

Brand & credentials = brand name, staff credentials, and certifications.

✓ The Action Item

Brands in different industries can't run the same playbook. Know how consumers in your industry behave and prioritize investments accordingly. Reviews matter everywhere, but visual content is especially critical for high-consideration categories like property, whereas accurate operational details are key for convenience categories like grocery and fuel. Credentials and AI recommendations matter most where trust and research factor highest. SOCi's Agentic Workforce adapts the signals and content for each location to what its category's customers actually value, so a restaurant and a bank are never marketed the same way.

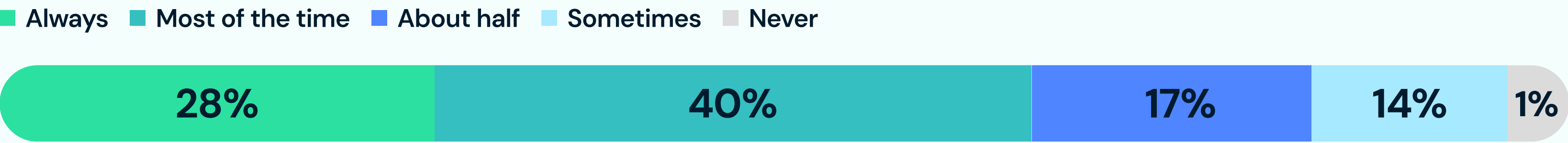
Takeaway 05 : Reputation Is The Price Of Entry

The Findings

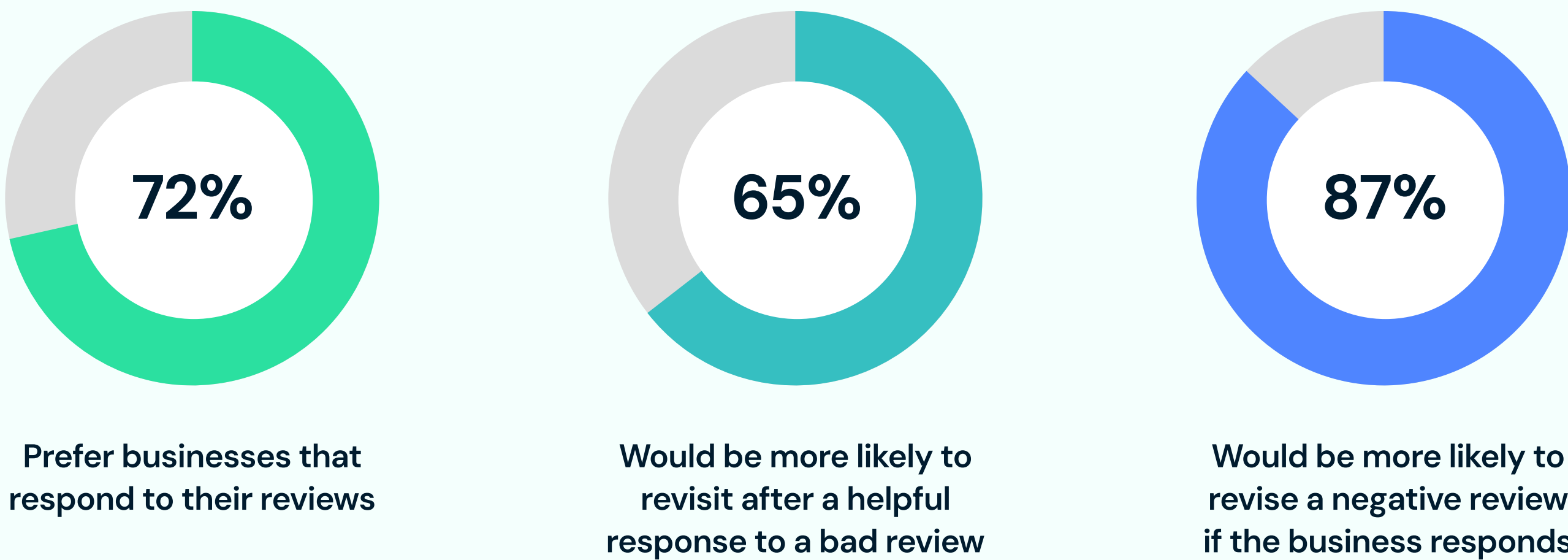
Reviews, long an important signal in local search, have mutated into a gating factor; AI engines are unlikely to recommend brands whose ratings fall below the threshold of the best in class. The fact that AI tools rely heavily on reviews relates directly to the trust placed in them by consumers. According to our findings, 99% of consumers read reviews at least some of the time before visiting a business, and 68% do so always or most of the time, and our consumer studies have shown for years that reputation is the filter that decides who even makes the shortlist. Consumers also reward engagement, not just star count: 72% are more likely to choose a business that responds to its reviews; 65% would be more likely to return after a helpful response to a bad review; and a remarkable 87% say they would be likely to revise a negative review to a positive one if the business responds helpfully.

Reviews Decide The Visit — And The Response Earns The Return

How Often Consumers Read Reviews Before A First Visit



When You Engage, They Reward You



Helpful Share

Income Changes Impact

Review importance is not uniform; it intensifies with income and shifts in character with age. The higher a consumer's household income, the more reviews both gate and reward the decision: the share who read reviews always or most of the time climbs from 63% of those earning under \$50,000 to 76% of those earning \$100,000 or more, the preference for businesses that respond to reviews rises from 62% to 80%, and the likelihood of returning after a helpful response to a bad review jumps from 53% to 74%. In short, a brand's highest-value customers are also its most reputation driven, and the ones most moved by engagement.

Consumers With Higher Incomes Are More Likely To Value Businesses That Respond To Reviews.



The More Consumers Earn, The More They Reward Review Engagement

Review behaviors by household income

■ Prefer businesses that respond to reviews ■ More likely to return after a helpful response



✓ The Action Item

Treat reputation as an always on growth program. Set response time targets, respond to negative and positive reviews, and track ratings by location as a leading indicator of both visibility and conversion. Because reviews feed the systems that decide who appears, improvement compounds: better ratings drive more visibility, which drives more reviews. SOCi's [Reputation Agent](#) drives ratings up and responds at scale, across every location.

Conclusion

Win The Loop, Not The Click

The 2026 Local Discovery Index makes one thing clear: local discovery is not a funnel, it is a verification loop. Consumers cross a web of search, social, AI, and reviews in a single decision, starting in one place, verifying in another, and deciding on a third, often within minutes. No single channel supports that journey alone.

The goal for multi-location brands is not to win one channel; it is to give consumers the same confident answer everywhere they look. When your hours, offerings, reviews, and AI-surfaced description all agree, you shorten the validation cycle and become the safe choice. When channels conflict or come up empty, you become the risk a consumer avoids. Visibility is no longer a campaign to run once; it is a system to operate continuously, at every location and on every surface where a consumer forms an opinion. Be everywhere your customers look, accurate and consistent on all of it, or be effectively nowhere. The brands that operate that way get found, chosen, and trusted. The ones that do not keep losing customers they never knew they had.

SOCi's Genius Agents run local search, social, and reputation at every location, so the loop holds from first impression to final decision. SOCi transforms marketing from software you manage into work that gets done, intelligently, consistently, and at scale.

The Verification Loop Is Measurable.

See exactly where your locations show up, and where they don't, across search, social, AI, and reviews. Request your Local Visibility Index audit at soci.ai/insights/lvi. 



Methodology

SOCi surveyed more than 1,000 U.S. consumers and weighted the results to mirror the U.S. population: a median age of 39, a near 50/50 gender split, and a median household income of roughly \$81,600. Respondents were asked how they discover, evaluate, and choose local businesses across search, social, AI, maps, and reviews. The 2024 and 2025 figures cited for year-over-year comparison are drawn from the prior two annual editions of the study. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

About SOCi

Making Every Location Visible.

Making Every Location Visible. SOCi is redefining how multi-location enterprises achieve local and AI search visibility with the world's first agentic workforce. Built specifically for distributed brands, SOCi's brand-trained agents are guided by a unified visibility engine that autonomously executes and optimizes local marketing work across AI search, GEO ecosystems, social, and reviews, ensuring every location is visible, discoverable, and growing in today's geo-driven landscape. Trusted by leading brands like Ford, Ace Hardware, and Liberty Tax, and recognized by Fast Company as one of the World's Most Innovative Companies, SOCi transforms marketing from software you manage into work that gets done, intelligently, consistently, and at scale.

Learn more at www.soci.ai or contact hello@soci.ai.

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INDEX**



SOC[↑]

**The Agentic Workforce
Built for Multi-Location Visibility.**