

# GEOLOCAL Research Brief

**Date:** 2026-10-01

**Branch:** planning-selfserve-audit

**North Star:** Enable local businesses to be discovered and recommended by AI assistants — scored as Presence + Recommendability.

**Relationship:** Evidence layer for *Alternate business proposal: North Star via accurate AI presence*. Does not replace the product architecture SoT ( SELF\_SERVE\_AI\_DISCOVERABILITY\_CONCEPT.md ). Labels: practitioner-reported · vendor · primary study · UNVERIFIED.

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## RESEARCH BRIEF

### The North Star

The durable statement lives in BUSINESS\_PLAN.md §1 (“North star (wording still open)”). **Verbatim:**

**Intent (stable):** Enable local businesses to be discovered and recommended by AI assistants.

Still wordsmithing the exact sentence. The job does not change while the phrasing does.

On this branch we score that intent as two outcomes (same meaning as Presence and Recommendability in the concept SoT):

1. **Present and accurately represented** wherever a local business is discovered — including AI answers, Google, Apple, Bing, Yelp, and the directory copies underneath.
2. **Recommendable** — if someone asks an AI for a business like yours nearby, would it pick you, and would it get the facts right?

Longer-term destination in the concept SoT (not version one): an industry graph the industry can use. Version one earns that by making the two outcomes above true in today’s assistants, with the owner’s consent.

## Three claims (read this first)

### 1. What the problem is.

Picture a bakery owner who keeps losing easy customers. People show up after closing because the hours online are wrong. Others call a disconnected number and never call back. A few say they asked an assistant for a nearby bakery and got pointed somewhere else — or got her shop with the old phone number. She sits down on a Tuesday night with a clear job: fix this. She updates her Google listing — new phone number, new weekend hours — and thinks customers will find the right info everywhere. They will not. The same details still sit wrong or missing on Yelp, Bing, Apple Maps, and dozens of other online directories. A handful of big data companies quietly copy that stale information around the web. When someone asks an AI assistant — ChatGPT, Gemini, or anything like them — “where’s a good bakery near me?”, that assistant often pulls from those scattered, outdated copies. Sometimes the shop never shows up. Sometimes it shows up with last year’s number. The owner never sees the miss. Customers lose trust. Fixing one listing is not the same as being findable and accurately described wherever people discover local businesses today, including when they ask AI.

### 2. What the industry looks like today.

Most of the “help your local business get found” industry still chases Google Maps wins: polish the Google business profile, collect reviews, post photos, clean up a few directory listings. That work can bring more phone calls from Google. Companies sell subscription tools that push your listing to many sites at once, score how “complete” your profile looks inside their own software, and track where you rank on a map. Almost none of those products answer the question owners now care about: what do AI assistants actually say about my business — do they find me, recommend me, and get the facts right? Outside research shows AI assistants name far fewer businesses than the short list of three Google shows at the top of many local searches, disagree with each other, and often get hours or phone numbers wrong even when they recognize the shop. People who work in this field warn that big listing subscriptions can lock up your data — stop paying and your listings may disappear. Small owners who do the work themselves usually get the credit for results. Customers are asking AI for local recommendations more than they did a year ago, but the tools for sale still mostly optimize last year’s game.

### 3. What we can build to solve it — and why it can be a business.

We build a product that starts with what the owner can feel: ask the major AI assistants what they say about this business, then show what is missing, wrong, or stale. That check is the reason to sign up. Behind it, one action files corrections on the places that actually feed those answers — the big data companies that fan out into many directories, and the major sites people and machines trust (Google, Apple, Bing, Yelp, and similar) — so the owner does not fill out a dozen forms. We still help them keep Google strong, because Google is where many customers double-check after an AI suggestion, and because a correct Google listing is useful proof when we ask other sites to update. We measure success simply: after the fixes, ask the same AI questions again — does the business show up, and is the description accurate? That is a viable business because owners already pay for listing tools that do not answer that question, AI recommendations are rising fast, and the gap between “I fixed Google” and “AI gets me right” is painful, visible, and mostly unserved.

## Pain

Local owners and agencies are stuck between two scoreboards that do not agree.

1. **Maps / pack pain is familiar and call-dense.** Practitioners report large call and pack swings from Google Business Profile (GBP) completeness, primary category, review velocity, and citation cleanup — but those wins are often Maps-lane attributions, not proof that ChatGPT / Perplexity / Gemini will name the shop correctly.
2. **AI pain is selective and accuracy-fragile.** Primary studies (SOCi LVI 2026, Insites Jul 2026, BrightLocal Local AI Visibility Study Sep 2026) show assistants recommend far fewer locations than Google’s short list of three at the top of many local searches (the “3-Pack”), disagree with each other, persist only ~half the time on re-prompt, and frequently misstate name, address, or phone (NAP) even when they “know” the business.
3. **Owners cannot see the gap.** Localeze Completeness, citation-count tools, and vibe-check prompt grids do not measure whether you are present on the surfaces assistants lean on, or whether an assistant would pick you *and* describe you accurately. Selling “cleanup ROI” as if aggregator correction alone moves AI answers lacks published pack/call studies.

Practitioner snapshot (r/localseo; full thread fetch often blocked — treat as **practitioner-reported**, not replicated):

| Claim (label)                                                                                              | Source thread (reddit)                                             | Notes                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ~73% of shops invisible to 4+ of 6 AI engines (50-business observational audit)                            | <a href="#">1slake5</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> observational audit; small n; methodology not independently reviewed                    |
| 15+ consistent listings claimed ~3× more likely to be recommended                                          | same cluster / community commentary around <a href="#">1slake5</a> | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; correlation ≠ causation                                                               |
| GBP completeness 82 → 100% → calls 14 → 26/mo (~86%), visibility 40 → 70% in ~12 days                      | <a href="#">1r23zji</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; community pushback: may be reclassification / seasonality, not pure completeness lift |
| Primary category swap: page 2 → top 3 in ~3 weeks                                                          | <a href="#">1viqf8z</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> Maps/pack outcome                                                                       |
| Delete ~40 bad citations: accuracy 74 → 98%, calls doubled ~6 weeks                                        | <a href="#">1v7s2ae</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; no controlled AI re-prompt evidence in thread                                         |
| GBP opt ~70% calls ~2 months; AI mentions stayed flat (comment)                                            | <a href="#">1o08abp</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; useful as “Maps ≠ AI” anecdote                                                        |
| Reviews 11 → 34, page 2 → pack, calls doubled ~6 weeks; attribution fight (~80% reviews?)                  | <a href="#">1vn7vjv</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; heavy confounding                                                                     |
| HVAC: review velocity as biggest lever                                                                     | <a href="#">1vtlpmi</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> vertical anecdote                                                                       |
| Citations-only → top 8–15, not top 3                                                                       | <a href="#">1m4woes</a>                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> ; citations help floor, not crown                                                       |
| Yext “data hostage” / listings vanish when stop paying; Synup cancel fee ~\$1,980; Uberall enterprise-only | community threads (vendor pricing folklore)                        | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> / vendor-commercial; verify contracts case-by-case                                      |
| DIY gets RESULT credit; paid pipes for scale past ~30 locations / 100+                                     | community consensus                                                | Product implication: ownership & tickets > hostage syndication                                                       |
| AI evidence thin vs Maps call evidence dense; ListingsAPI: no win case study                               | community meta                                                     | Aligns with BrightLocal / Insites gaps below                                                                         |

## What works (with evidence)

### Maps / GBP / reviews (dense call evidence — mostly practitioner + expert surveys)

| Lever                                                                                                                  | Evidence                                                                                                                | Label                                                   | URL / cite                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary GBP category, proximity, keywords in GBP title, address in city, open-now                                      | Whitespark LSRF 2026 “pack kings” (survey posted ~Nov 6, 2025)                                                          | <b>Vendor / expert survey</b> (47 experts, 187 factors) | <a href="https://whitespark.ca/local-search-ranking-factors">whitespark.ca/local-search-ranking-factors</a> |
| GBP completeness / category / reviews → pack & calls                                                                   | Multiple r/localseo case posts (table above)                                                                            | <b>Practitioner-reported</b>                            | reddit threads linked above                                                                                 |
| Review volume & recency                                                                                                | Insites dual-surfaced avg <b>133.4</b> Google reviews vs <b>10.7</b> for neither; Whitespark: review recency underrated | <b>Primary study + expert survey</b>                    | <a href="#">Insites benchmark</a> ; Whitespark LSRF 2026                                                    |
| Dedicated service pages, best-of lists, industry domains, unstructured citation <i>quality</i> , review-site authority | Whitespark LSRF 2026 AI-factor discussion                                                                               | <b>Vendor / expert survey</b>                           | same LSRF page                                                                                              |
| DIY ownership of GBP + majors                                                                                          | Community: DIY gets RESULT credit                                                                                       | <b>Practitioner-reported</b>                            | r/localseo meta                                                                                             |

### AI visibility (thinner causal evidence; stronger descriptive studies)

| Finding                                                                                                                                                                | Evidence                                                            | Label                                    | URL                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AIO ~68% vs local packs ~39% on Whitespark local-business query set (540 queries; May 12, 2025)                                                                        | Whitespark / Miriam Ellis prevalence study                          | <b>Primary study</b> (vendor-affiliated) | <a href="https://whitespark.ca">whitespark.ca</a> case study                                                                |
| Maps mention 66% vs AI surfaces 32–38%; ChatGPT ∩ Google AIs ~19–20%; persistence ~50%; top citations GBP 28.6%, Yelp 9.5%, Facebook 2.2%                              | BrightLocal Local AI Visibility Study, Sep 16, 2026 (~200k prompts) | <b>Primary study</b> (vendor)            | <a href="https://brightlocal.com/research/local-ai-visibility-study">brightlocal.com/research/local-ai-visibility-study</a> |
| Consumer AI local recs 6% → 45% YoY; 23% used AI in last local search; of AI users ~18% contact direct, ~75% check Google/Maps                                         | BrightLocal LCRS 2026 / related AI-trust cuts                       | <b>Primary study</b> (survey)            | <a href="#">LCRS</a> ; <a href="#">LCRS AI trust</a>                                                                        |
| ChatGPT recommends <b>1.2%</b> of brand locations vs <b>35.9%</b> in 3-Pack (~30× selective); ~45% retail overlap traditional vs AI                                    | SOCi LVI 2026 (~350k locations / 2,751 brands)                      | <b>Primary study</b> (vendor)            | <a href="#">soci.ai</a> news; <a href="#">LVI PDF</a>                                                                       |
| GBP detail match ChatGPT ~55.58% / Perplexity ~48.05%; never recommended unbranded 40.88% / 68.79%; “corroboration, not optimisation”; schema/lms.txt barely correlate | Insites 10k US locals (Jul 2026)                                    | <b>Primary study</b> (vendor platform)   | <a href="#">Insites benchmark</a> ; <a href="#">schema piece</a>                                                            |

### Synthesis (not a causal claim):

- **GBP excellence remains mandatory** — proof hub, Maps call volume, and the strongest public corroboration signal assistants echo.
- **Consistent, high-quality presence on majors + umbrellas** supports corroboration (Insites framing) more than vanity citation spam.
- **Review velocity and volume** correlate with both pack and dual-AI surfacing; still confound-heavy for AI alone.
- **Measuring AI separately from Maps** is itself useful practice (BrightLocal Maps 66% vs AI 32–38%; SOCi selectivity).

## What doesn't / waste

| Anti-pattern                                                     | Why it fails / is waste                                                                                                                                                                         | Label                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Recurring listing fees for ≤~10 locations                        | Whitespark commentary: prefer one-time / DIY at small scale                                                                                                                                     | <b>Vendor / practitioner</b>                      |
| Mass low-DA citation blasts                                      | Expert consensus: noise; citations-only stalls at ~top 8–15                                                                                                                                     | <b>Expert survey + practitioner</b>               |
| Selling citation-cleanup-only as pack/AI ROI                     | <b>No clean published cleanup-only → +X% pack/calls study</b><br>(Whitespark: no clean citation-cleanup-only ROI study; BrightLocal: no published aggregator-correction → +X% pack/calls study) | Gap — do not sell                                 |
| Yext-like ongoing pipe as the product                            | “Data hostage” / listings vanish when stop paying; Synup cancel-fee folklore (~\$1,980); Uberall enterprise-only                                                                                | <b>Practitioner-reported</b> commercial risk      |
| Assuming Uberall breadth / older directory studies = cleanup ROI | Older breadth studies ≠ correction ROI                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Vendor historical</b> — not cleanup ROI        |
| Treating Localeze Completeness Score as an AI audit              | Completeness = hub fill-in (Primary / Discovery / Connect / Hours), not a web AI Presence/Recommendability check                                                                                | Product fact (umbrella / Lane A)                  |
| Schema / llms.txt as the AI lever                                | Insites: barely correlate with recommendation                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Primary study</b>                              |
| Citations-only strategy for top 3                                | Practitioner: top 8–15 ceiling without GBP/reviews/on-page                                                                                                                                      | <b>Practitioner-reported</b>                      |
| ListingsAPI as proven win path                                   | Community: no win case study found                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Practitioner-reported / UNVERIFIED</b> absence |
| Equating OpenAI ↔ Foursquare partnership with ranking lift       | Partnership / Places adjacency ≠ proven ranking lever                                                                                                                                           | Architecture caveat                               |
| Foursquare “60–70% of ChatGPT local”                             | Often phrased as “reports suggest”                                                                                                                                                              | <b>UNVERIFIED</b> — do not treat as fact          |

BrightLocal framing remains useful commercially: **Google first, LLMs second** — not because AI doesn’t matter (LCRS 6% → 45%), but because Maps still mentions tracked businesses more often and most AI users still verify on Google/Maps.

## AI visibility vs classic local SEO framing

| Dimension                                | Classic local SEO (Maps / pack)                                                        | AI visibility (assistants / AIO)                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unit of success                          | Rank in 3-Pack / Maps; calls from GBP                                                  | Named in answer; facts correct; re-prompt persistence                                                                 |
| Selectivity                              | 3-Pack ~35.9% brand appearance (SOCi)                                                  | ChatGPT ~1.2% recommended (SOCi) — ~30× tighter                                                                       |
| Overlap                                  | Pack ranking helps but does not guarantee AI mention                                   | BrightLocal: Maps 66% vs AI 32–38%; intersection ChatGPT ∩ Google AIs ~19–20%                                         |
| Stability                                | Rankings move; calls are measurable                                                    | Persistence ~50% on re-prompt (BrightLocal)                                                                           |
| Top “citations” / sources                | GBP, site, reviews, citations                                                          | GBP still top among directories (~28.6%), but business sites dominate unique domains; Yelp/Facebook trail             |
| Expert factor mix (Whitespark LSRF 2026) | Pack kings: primary category, proximity, GBP title keywords, in-city address, open-now | AI lean: best-of lists, service pages, industry domains, unstructured citation <i>quality</i> , review-site authority |
| Consumer behavior                        | Call / direction intent                                                                | LCRS: AI recs mainstream (45%); many still verify on Google/Maps                                                      |
| Accuracy failure mode                    | Wrong hours on GBP hurt conversion                                                     | Assistants misstate NAP ~half the time even when “aware” (Insites)                                                    |
| Product scoreboard                       | Rank + calls                                                                           | Presence + Recommendability                                                                                           |

Classic local SEO is necessary infrastructure and the densest call evidence; AI visibility is a **separate, more selective** surface that needs its own audit (mentioned vs recommended vs **misstated**). Do not collapse them into one vanity “AI SEO” score.

## Gaps and caveats

1. **Causal AI ROI from cleanup is unpublished.** No BrightLocal / Whitespark / SOCi paper cleanly shows “aggregator correction alone → +X% AI mentions or pack.” Do not invent one.
2. **r/localseo numbers are observational.** Threads like 1slake5 (73% invisible...), 1r23zji (completeness → calls), etc. are **practitioner-reported**; n is small; confounders (season, category change, ads) are real. Community already flags reclassification risk on completeness wins.
3. **Vendor studies have incentives.** BrightLocal, Whitespark, SOCi, Insites sell adjacent products. Still useful as **primary study** descriptive baselines — cite methodology, don’t treat as gospel.
4. **Foursquare 60–70% of ChatGPT local = UNVERIFIED** when phrased as “reports suggest.” OpenAI partnership ≠ ranking lever. Managed Users timing remains an open question in the proposal.
5. **Localeze Lane A mechanics:** ~\$99/year per location paywall; **no free suggest-edit**; Completeness Score = hub sections (Primary / Discovery / Connect / Hours), not a web AI audit; monthly partners often **30–90 days** — set owner expectations.
6. **Uberall / Yext / Synup commercial caveats** are practitioner folklore until contract-checked; still inform “don’t build a hostage pipe.”
7. **ListingsAPI:** no community win case study located — treat as non-proof, not proof of failure.

8. 8. **Insites “corroboration, not optimisation”** undercuts schema/llms.txt-first GEO pitches; aligns with ticketed accuracy across real claim surfaces.
9. 9. **SOCi sample is multi-location brands** (~350k locations). SMB single-shop dynamics may differ; still the clearest public selectivity ratio (~30×).
10. 10. **BrightLocal citation mix** (GBP 28.6% / Yelp 9.5% / Facebook 2.2%) is study-specific; website citations dominate unique domains — own site still matters.

## Implications for this proposal

### Build toward

1. 1. **Accuracy-aware AI audit** — fixed buyer prompts; score Presence (found on claim surfaces / stomped copies) and Recommendability (named when it matters; facts match claimed truth). Prefer mentioned vs recommended vs **misstated** over vanity mention counts.
2. 2. **One-click tickets for umbrellas (Lane A) and majors (Lane B)** — field / wrong / right / GBP-or-claimed-truth as proof. Umbrella-only leaves Core majors wrong; majors-only leaves Layer-1 feeds stomping the claim.
3. 3. **GBP excellence still required** — densest call evidence; strongest corroboration signal; proof hub for tickets. Do not market AI audit as a GBP substitute.
4. 4. **Don’t sell fake cleanup ROI** — no published aggregator-correction → +X% pack/calls or AI-mention study. Sell measurable re-prompt improvement and accurate tickets, not guaranteed pack jumps.
5. 5. **Measure AI separately from Maps** — BrightLocal / SOCi / Insites all show divergence. Product dashboards must not blend pack rank into an “AI score.”
6. 6. **DIY result credit ⇒ product posture** — make tickets and ownership easy; avoid Yext-like hostage pipes where Presence evaporates when the subscription stops. Paid pipes remain relevant for scale (~30+ / 100+ locations per practitioner consensus), as optional scale lanes — not the identity of the product.
7. 7. **Localeze / Foursquare honesty** — charge/time expectations (Localeze paywall, 30–90 day partners); Foursquare Placemaker suggest-edit is real; OpenAI adjacency is not a ranking claim; Managed Users later.

### Success check

Re-prompt the same asks; Presence and Recommendability improve (found, recommended, facts correct) — not “Localeze score went up,” not “we submitted 400 citations.”