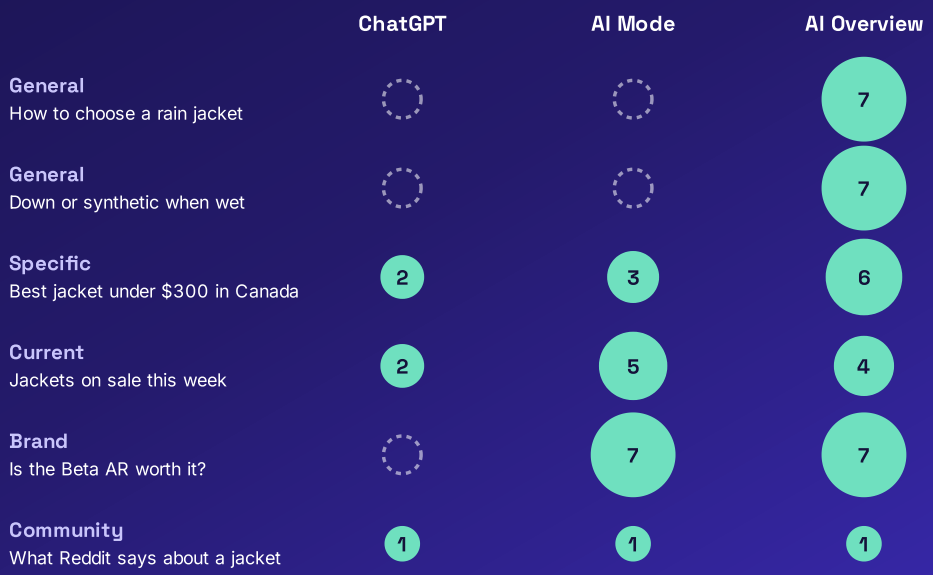
Absorbed, Not Credited

When do AI assistants credit the pages they learn from? Six outdoor gear questions, three AI tools, every source counted.



Circle size and number show sources credited. Dashed rings: answered with no sources at all.

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18 answers, 53 credited sources
Collected October 24, 2026

The short version

Buying guides teach AI assistants a lot. But do the assistants give credit back? I asked ChatGPT, Google AI Mode and Google's AI Overview six outdoor gear questions, from general advice to specific, current and brand questions, and counted every source they credited.

0 of 4	**General advice is absorbed.** For "how to choose" questions, ChatGPT and Google AI Mode answered in full and credited no one.
3 of 3	**Specifics switch credit on.** Adding a price, a country or "this week" made all three tools cite sources.
8 of 14	**Testing earns the credit.** For "is it worth it?", most credited links went to independent reviewers who test gear.
6	**One retailer was credited most.** MEC appeared in six answers, more than any other site, including Reddit and YouTube.
3 of 3	**Community questions go to the community.** Asked what Reddit says, every tool credited Reddit and nothing else.

What it means: general content that repeats what everyone knows now feeds AI answers without earning a visit. Credit goes to what an AI can't already know: test results, prices, local availability, current offers and real people's experience.

Why credit matters

An AI answer can use your knowledge in two ways: absorb it into what it already knows, or retrieve your page and credit it.

Absorbed

The assistant answers from what it learned in training. Your guide may have shaped the answer, but no link, no name and no visit come back to you.

Credited

The assistant retrieves pages at the moment of the question and links them as sources. This is where AI visibility turns into traffic and trust.

Information gain is the dividing line

If a page only restates what's already widely known, an assistant doesn't need to look it up. Pages that add something new, such as tests, numbers, prices or first-hand experience, give the assistant a reason to retrieve and cite them.

Why outdoor gear

Outdoor gear has deep buying guides from brands, retailers, reviewers and communities, so it shows clearly which kind of page gets credit for which kind of question. It also matches the working example in the Beyond Keywords workbook.

How the study worked

Six questions in six shapes, from general advice to community opinion, asked in three AI tools on the same day.

1

Six question types

General, specific, current, brand and community, written the way a shopper would ask.

2

Three tools

ChatGPT in a temporary chat, Google AI Mode, and the AI Overview on a regular Google search.

3

Count the credit

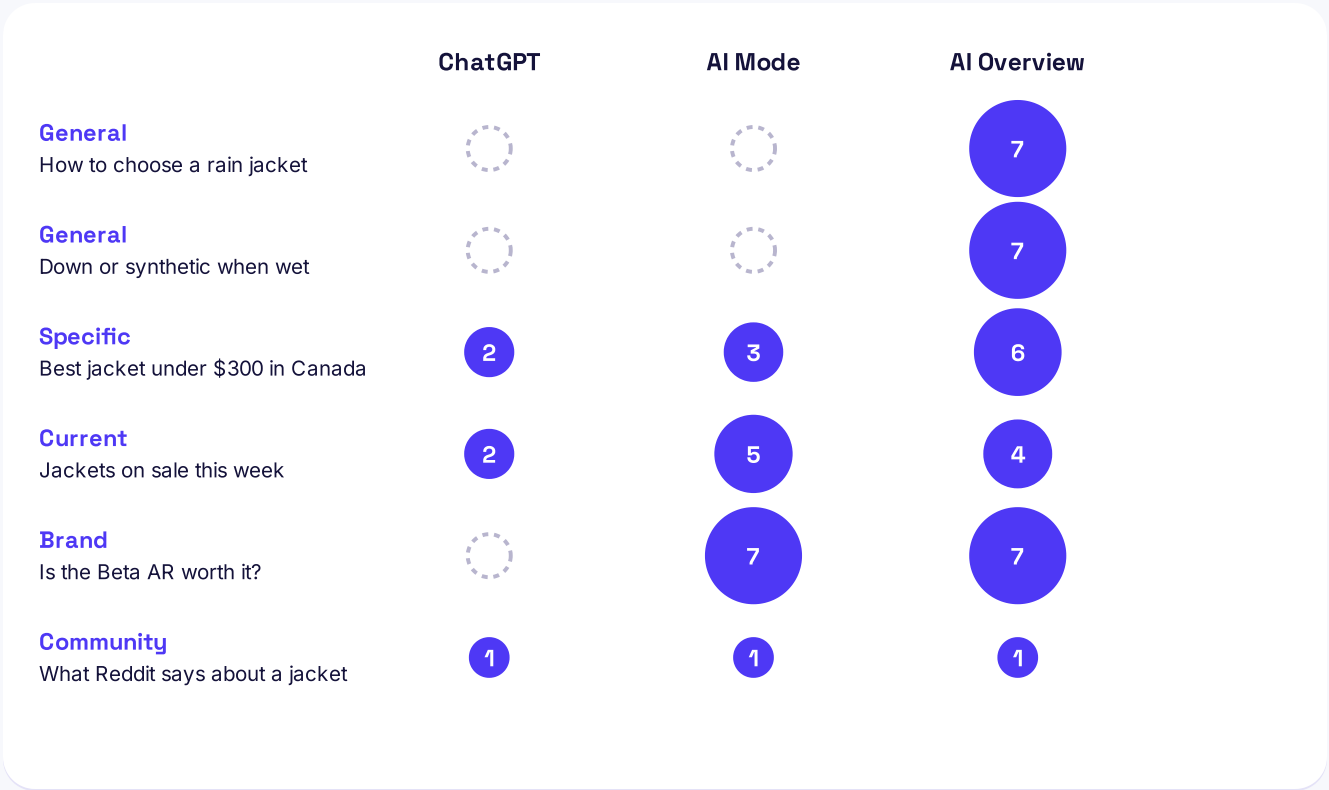
Every source each answer linked, grouped by type: brand site, retailer, independent reviewer or blog, and community or video.

Type	Question asked
General	How do I choose a waterproof hiking jacket?
General	Down or synthetic insulation: which is better in wet weather?
Specific	What is the best waterproof hiking jacket under $300 in Canada?
Current	Which hiking jackets are on sale this week in Canada?
Brand	Is the Arc'teryx Beta AR worth the price in 2026?
Community	What are people saying about the Patagonia Torrentshell 3L on Reddit?

Collected on October 24, 2026, from Vancouver. Google AI Mode ran on a signed-in account showing a "PRO" label. AI Overview sources were read from the overview panel on a regular search for the same question. Answers vary between runs, so treat this as a snapshot.

The credit grid

Every source credited, for every question, in every tool.



3 of 6

ChatGPT

answers credited sources, 5 links in total

4 of 6

Google AI Mode

answers credited sources, 16 links in total

6 of 6

Google AI Overview

answers credited sources, 32 links in total

Every credited source

The full list behind the grid, by question type and tool.

Type	ChatGPT	AI Mode	AI Overview
General	*No sources*	*No sources*	hellyhansen.com, rei.com, youtube.com, outdoor-girl.com, mountain-equipment.com, mec.ca, rab.equipment
General	*No sources*	*No sources*	rei.com, youtube.com, thenorthface.com, alpenglowgear.com, jottnar.com, rab.equipment, outdoorresearch.com
Specific	patagonia.ca, mec.ca	treelinereview.com, mec.ca, cleverhiker.com	outdoorgearlab.com, mec.ca, altitude-sports.com, decathlon.ca, youtube.com, livefortheoutdoors.com
Current	columbiasportswear.ca, decathlon.ca	mec.ca, columbiasportswear.ca, adidas.ca, decathlon.ca, amazon.ca	sportinglife.ca, patagonia.ca, mec.ca, mountainhardwear.ca
Brand	*No sources*	switchbacktravel.com, reddit.com, outlet.arcteryx.com, gearpatrol.com, arcteryx.com, ssense.com, evo.com	outdoorgearlab.com, gearpatrol.com, switchbacktravel.com, youtube.com, telegraph.co.uk, thebrokebackpacker.com, gearjunkie.com
Community	reddit.com	reddit.com	reddit.com

Finding 1

General advice is absorbed

For the two "how to choose" questions, two of the three tools answered fully and credited nobody.

0 sources

ChatGPT and Google AI Mode

Detailed advice on waterproof ratings, layers, breathability and insulation, with no links at all.

7 sources each

Google AI Overview

Mostly brand and retailer buying guides: REI, MEC, Rab, Helly Hansen, The North Face, Outdoor Research and others.

The overview credits what already ranks

For the rain jacket question, six of the seven sources in the AI Overview (all but YouTube) were among the top eight regular search results for the same query. On Google, ranking well is still the path to being credited for general advice.

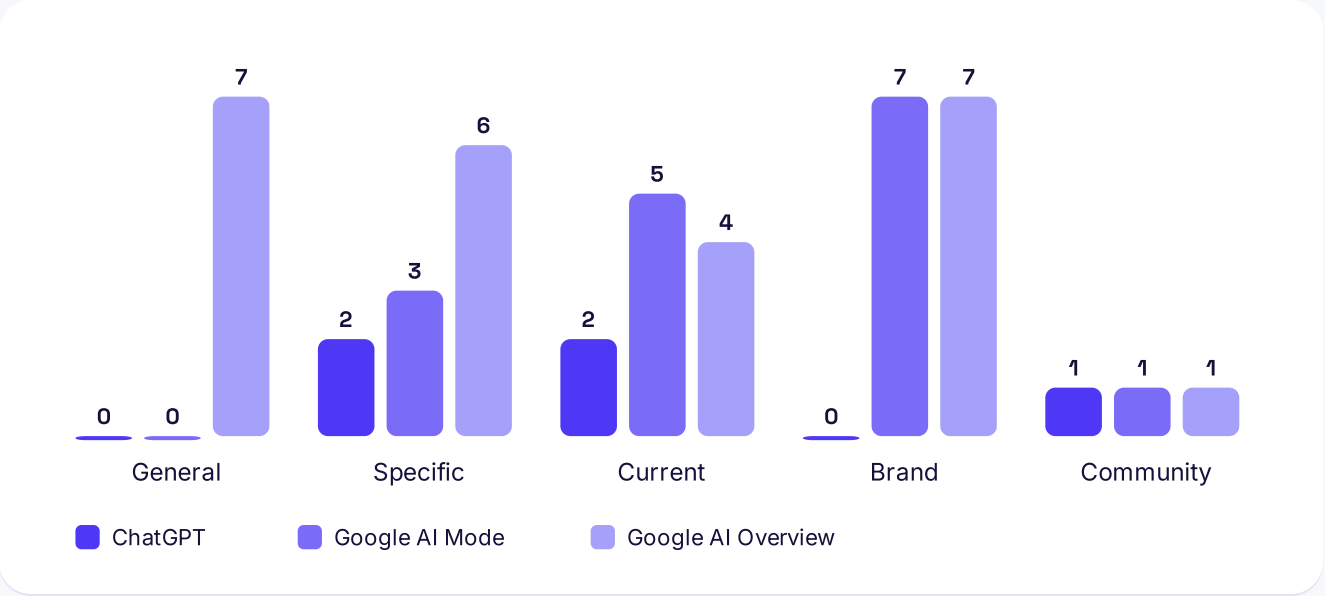
Elsewhere, the guide becomes training data

In ChatGPT and AI Mode, the same knowledge appears without attribution. A brand's guide may have taught the assistant, but the shopper never sees where it came from.

Finding 2

Specifics switch credit on

Average number of sources credited per answer, by question type.



Price, place and time trigger a search

"Best jacket under **$300** in **Canada**" and "on sale **this week**" made every tool look pages up and credit them. These are facts a model can't know from training: current prices, stock and local options.

A year isn't enough

Asked whether the Arc'teryx Beta AR is "worth the price in 2026", ChatGPT still answered from memory with no sources, while both Google tools credited seven. Adding a date doesn't guarantee a fresh look.

Finding 3

Each question credits a different kind of page

The type of question decides which type of site wins the credit.

Question type	Who got the credit	Examples
General	Brand and retailer buying guides (AI Overview only)	REI, MEC, Rab, Helly Hansen, The North Face
Specific	Retailers and independent testers	MEC, OutdoorGearLab, Treeline Review, CleverHiker
Current	Retailers and brand stores only	MEC, Columbia, Decathlon, Sporting Life, Amazon
Brand	Independent reviewers, plus Reddit and the brand	Switchback Travel, Gear Patrol, OutdoorGearLab, GearJunkie
Community	Reddit, and only Reddit	reddit.com in all three tools

Testing earns trust

For the brand question, 8 of 14 credited links went to independent reviewers who test gear in the field. First-hand testing is exactly the information gain an assistant can't produce on its own.

MEC shows up everywhere

The Canadian retailer was credited in six answers, across general, specific and current questions: deep guides, Canadian prices and live stock, all on one site.

Finding 4

Brand questions split the tools, community questions don’t

Is the Arc'teryx Beta AR worth the price in 2026?

ChatGPT
A full verdict from memory, with no sources.

Google AI Mode
Seven sources: Switchback Travel, Gear Patrol, Reddit, Arc'teryx and its outlet, SSENSE and evo.

Google AI Overview
Seven sources, nearly all reviewers: OutdoorGearLab, Gear Patrol, Switchback Travel, GearJunkie, The Telegraph and more.

What are people saying about the Patagonia Torrentshell 3L on Reddit?

All three tools
Credited Reddit, and only Reddit.

Your product’s reputation is written by others

When shoppers ask about a specific product, Google leans on reviewers and community threads. A brand's own page was only one of seven sources.

Communities are a source in their own right

When the question names a community, assistants go straight to it. Real discussion of your products, where it happens naturally, is part of how AI describes them.

What brands can do

If general advice gets absorbed, the goal shifts: publish what earns credit, and keep it current.

Publish what AI can't already know

Test results, measurements, comparisons and first-hand use, not general advice anyone could write.

The evidence: Testing sites won the brand question; general guides went uncredited in two tools.

Keep prices, stock and offers live and crawlable

Accurate prices, availability and current deals on product pages, with product structured data and feeds.

The evidence: Every tool credited retailers for 'under $300' and 'on sale this week'.

Rank for the general questions

On Google, the AI Overview credited the guides that already rank.

The evidence: Six of seven overview sources were in the top eight results.

Earn independent reviews

Send products to credible testers and make specifications easy to verify.

The evidence: Reviewers took 8 of 14 credited links for the brand question.

Be part of real conversations

Answer questions in communities honestly, as a named brand, without astroturfing.

The evidence: Reddit was the only source credited for the community question.

Track credit by question type

Monitor general, specific, current, brand and community questions separately.

The evidence: Each type credited a different kind of site.

Limits, and the series

Read this as a snapshot

- Six questions, three tools, one day. A larger set would show how stable each pattern is.
- Google AI Mode ran signed in with a "PRO" label, which may affect when it cites sources.
- AI Overview sources were read from the overview panel; a page's position there wasn't recorded.
- Credit was counted from links shown. An assistant may use sources it doesn't display.

The complete series

Study 1, The AI Shelf: which brands AI recommends. **Study 2, Who Are You, Really?:** brand consistency and the knowledge graph. **Study 3, Does Size Buy Trust?:** E-E-A-T by brand size. **Study 4, this report:** when AI credits its sources. Companion workbook: **Beyond Keywords**.

Independent research

This is an independent analysis based on publicly available AI answers and search results. I have not worked with, or been endorsed by, any company mentioned.

SEO Girl

Where AI meets search, I make brands visible.

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