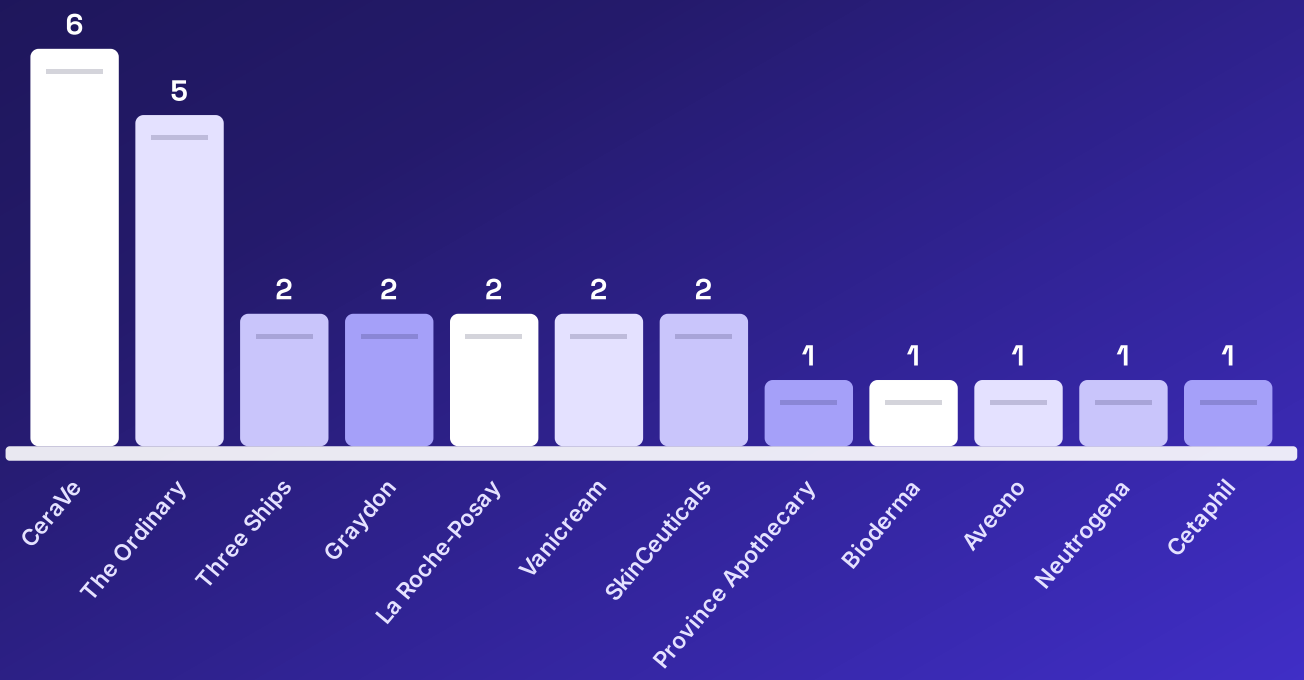
The AI Shelf: Skincare

Which skincare brands do AI assistants put in front of Canadian shoppers, and what does it take to get there?



Brands named in 12 AI answers to skincare questions that didn't mention a brand

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18 answers from ChatGPT and Google AI Mode
Collected October 24, 2026

The short version

The first study in this series looked at sustainable apparel. This one applies the same method to skincare: nine shopper questions, from "good Canadian brands" to "is this brand legit?", asked in ChatGPT and Google AI Mode.

2 shelves	**"Canadian" and "for my skin" are different shelves.** Canadian indie brands appeared only when the question asked for Canadian brands. For skin needs, the shelf belonged to dermatologist pharmacy brands.
6 of 12	**CeraVe owns the skin-need shelf.** It appeared in half of all answers to questions that named no brand. The Ordinary followed with five, the only Canadian brand to cross over.
2 vs 9	**Google credits, ChatGPT doesn't.** ChatGPT cited sources in 2 of 9 answers. Google AI Mode cited sources in all 9, with 68 links.
JAMA	**Health questions get medical sources.** For clean beauty and sensitive skin, Google cited JAMA, Harvard Health and dermatology clinics.
13 of 18	**The proof is clinical.** Named ingredients appeared in 13 answers, ahead of every sustainability signal.

How the study worked

The same method as The AI Shelf: shopper questions at each stage, asked in two assistants on the same day.

1

Nine questions

Three per stage, in a shopper's words. Only decision questions name a brand.

2

Two assistants

ChatGPT in a temporary chat and Google AI Mode, one fresh conversation each.

3

Record

Brands named and their order, sources linked, and the proof points each answer used.

Stage	Question
Awareness	What are some good Canadian skincare brands?
Awareness	Is clean beauty actually better for your skin?
Awareness	How do I build a simple skincare routine for sensitive skin?
Consideration	What is the best moisturizer for dry skin in Canadian winters?
Consideration	Which affordable skincare brands are fragrance-free and sold in Canada?
Consideration	What is the best vitamin C serum for beginners?
Decision	Is The Ordinary good quality?
Decision	The Ordinary vs Drunk Elephant: which is better value?
Decision	Is Province Apothecary a legit skincare brand?

Collected on October 24, 2026, from Vancouver. Brands and proof points were detected by automated matching of names and keywords in each answer, then reviewed. Google AI Mode ran signed in. This study reports what the assistants said; it isn't skincare or medical advice.

Finding 1

”Canadian” and ”for my skin” are different shelves

The same assistants built two completely different shelves, depending on how the question was framed.

Asked for Canadian brands

The Ordinary · Three Ships · Graydon · Province Apothecary · Cheekbone Beauty · Rocky Mountain Soap · Elate

Indie and founder-led brands, cited from retailers like Sephora and The Detox Market and from Elle Canada. Google noted Cheekbone is Indigenous-owned.

Asked for a skin need

CeraVe · The Ordinary · La Roche-Posay · Vanicream · SkinCeuticals · Bioderma · Cetaphil

Dermatologist and pharmacy brands, for winter dryness, fragrance-free needs and vitamin C.

The indie brands vanish

Three Ships, Graydon, Province Apothecary, Cheekbone and Elate appeared only in answers to the "Canadian brands" question. None appeared when a shopper described a skin concern, even with "Canadian winters" or "sold in Canada" in the question.

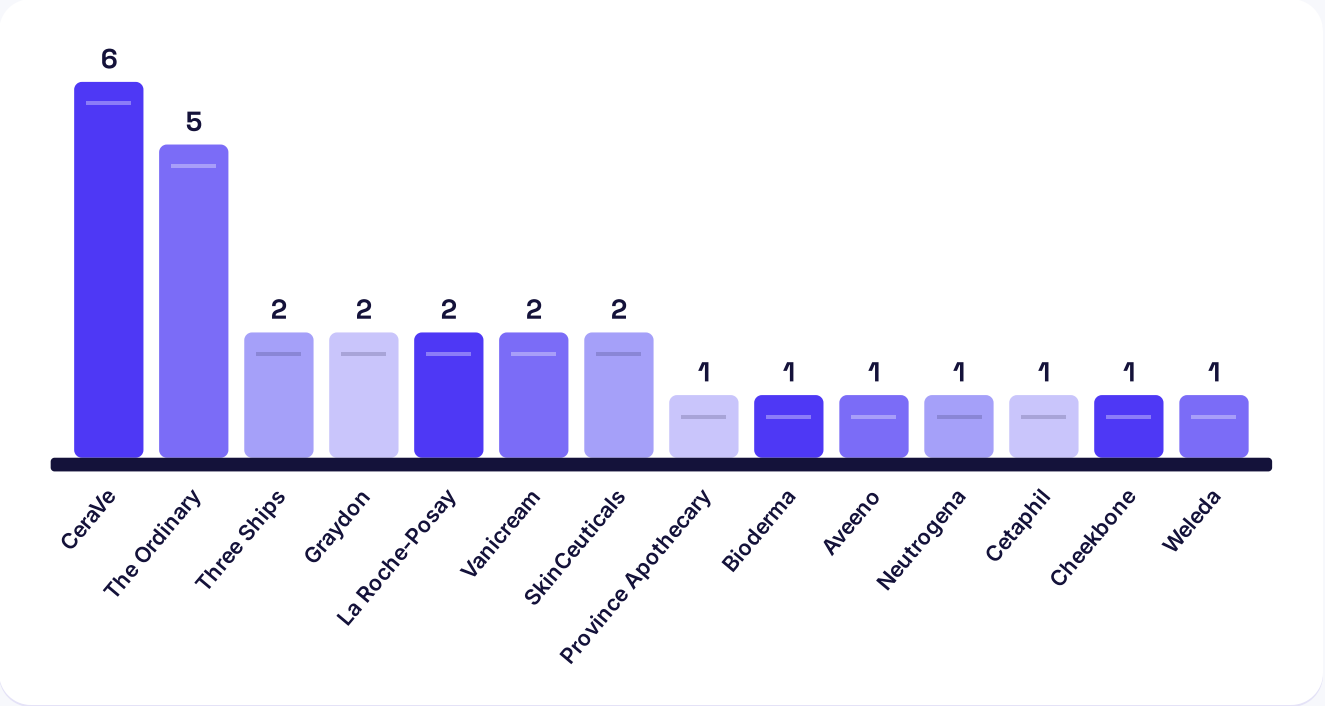
Why it matters

Most shoppers describe their skin, not their passport preference. For indie brands, being known as Canadian isn't enough; they need to be known for solving a specific skin need.

Finding 2

CeraVe owns the shelf, The Ordinary crosses over

Brands named across the 12 answers to questions that named no brand.



Number of answers (out of 12) naming each brand. Elate, Rocky Mountain Soap, Mad Hippie and Klairs also appeared once.

A pharmacy default

CeraVe appeared in **6 of 12** unbranded answers, in both assistants, much as tentree did for sustainable apparel. When an assistant needs one safe recommendation for skin, it reaches for a dermatologist-associated pharmacy brand.

The Canadian exception

The Ordinary, owned by Toronto's Deciem, appeared in five answers and is the only Canadian brand on both shelves. Its reputation rests on named actives and low prices: the same clinical, verifiable proof the assistants favour.

Finding 3

Google credits, ChatGPT doesn’t

How often each assistant showed its sources, and where Google's came from.

2 of 9

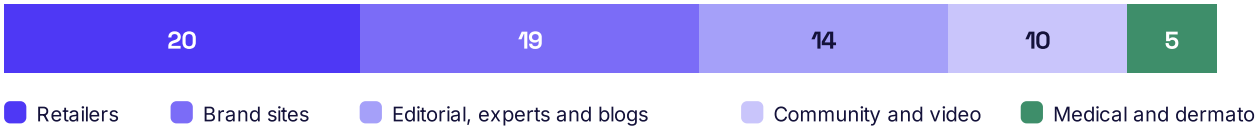
ChatGPT answers with sources

3 links in total: Elle Canada, Well.ca and Province Apothecary's own site.

9 of 9

Google AI Mode answers with sources

68 links in total, across retailers, brands, editors, communities and medical sources.



Google AI Mode's 68 source links, by type.

Health questions bring in experts

For "Is clean beauty actually better for your skin?", Google cited **JAMA**, **Harvard Health** and dermatology sites. For a sensitive-skin routine, it cited a **Toronto dermatology clinic** alongside Allure and Byrdie.

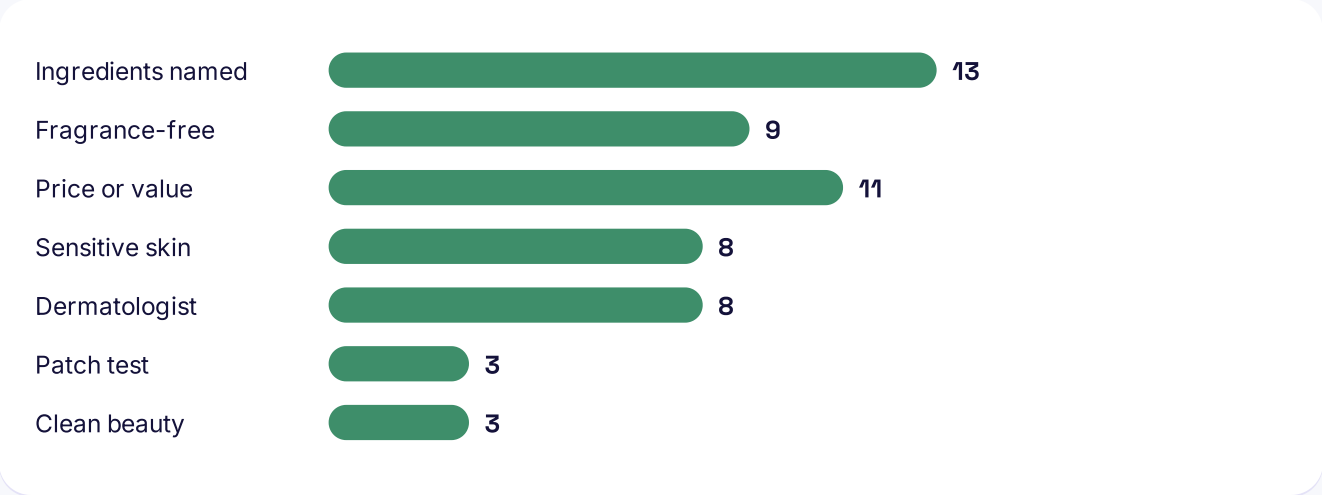
A contrast with outdoor gear

In Study 4, Google AI Mode credited no one for general gear advice. For skin, a health-adjacent topic, it credited sources every time. The more a question touches health, the more Google wants evidence on display.

Finding 4

The vocabulary of trust is clinical

The proof points assistants used to recommend skincare, across all 18 answers.



Number of answers (out of 18) mentioning each proof point.

Specific beats virtuous

Assistants recommended products by naming actives (ceramides, niacinamide, vitamin C) and concentrations, and by flagging fragrance-free formulas. "Clean beauty" came up mainly to explain that it isn't a regulated term.

Compared with apparel

In sustainable apparel, the leading proof was "recycled" and certifications like B Corp. In skincare, it's clinical: ingredients, dermatologists and skin types. Each category has its own vocabulary of trust.

Finding 5

At the decision, the assistants agree

When shoppers ask about a specific brand, both assistants answer confidently and in the same direction.

Is The Ordinary good quality?

ChatGPT
Yes: good quality, especially considering its affordable prices.

Google AI Mode
Yes: science-backed and exceptional value, citing Lab Muffin, Reddit and YouTube.

The Ordinary vs Drunk Elephant: which is better value?

ChatGPT
The Ordinary, by a wide margin.

Google AI Mode
Product by product with prices: The Ordinary wins on marula oil, citing Reddit, TikTok and forums.

Is Province Apothecary a legit skincare brand?

ChatGPT
Yes: an established Canadian brand, naming founder Julie Clark.

Google AI Mode
Yes: founded in Toronto in 2012 by Julie Clark, citing retailers and a press release.

A named founder carries trust. Province Apothecary was described confidently in both assistants, with its founder, city and year. As in Study 3, a clear human story on the brand's own pages gives AI something concrete to repeat.

What skincare brands can do

Six moves, each tied to what the assistants actually did.

Own a skin need, not just a flag

Build pages and proof around specific concerns (winter dryness, sensitivity, beginners) rather than only being Canadian.

The evidence: Indie brands appeared only for the 'Canadian brands' question.

Name your actives and percentages

State key ingredients, concentrations and skin types clearly on every product page.

The evidence: Named ingredients appeared in more answers than any other proof point.

Be fragrance-free friendly, and say so

Label fragrance-free formulas and explain who they're for.

The evidence: Fragrance-free was a leading proof point across both stages.

Earn expert voices

Dermatologists, aestheticians and science communicators reviewing or explaining your products.

The evidence: Google cited Lab Muffin, dermatology clinics and medical sources.

Be present where Google shops

Accurate listings at Sephora, Shoppers Drug Mart, London Drugs and Amazon.

The evidence: Retailers were Google's most cited source type.

Tell the founder story

Founder, city and year, stated clearly and consistently.

The evidence: Both assistants described Province Apothecary through its founder.

Across the series, and the limits

	Sustainable apparel (Study 1)	Skincare (this study)
The default brand	tentree, in 8 of 16 unbranded answers	CeraVe, in 6 of 12
Leading proof	Recycled materials, B Corp	Named ingredients, fragrance-free, dermatologists
Canadian brands	Lead the shelf	Only when asked for Canadian brands
Google's sources	Brands, editors, communities	Retailers, brands, editors, communities and medical sources

Read this as a snapshot

- 18 answers, one day, two assistants; answers vary between runs.
- Brands were detected by automated matching, then reviewed.
- Google AI Mode ran signed in; both assistants used location.
- This reports what assistants said. It isn't skincare or medical advice.

Independent research

An independent analysis of publicly available AI answers. I have not worked with, or been endorsed by, any brand mentioned. Brand names are used only to report what the assistants said.

SEO Girl

Where AI meets search, I make brands visible.

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