

RESEARCH REPORT

State of AI Recommendations: Charleston 2026

ARO Index Research · 686 businesses audited · v2 methodology · aroindex.com

686

BUSINESSES AUDITED

24%

ZERO OF 4 MODELS SELECT THEM

64.6

AVERAGE ARO SCORE

The businesses selling visibility can't get recommended themselves

54% of Charleston marketing agencies are invisible to AI. When a buyer asks ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or Perplexity to recommend a marketing agency in Charleston, 56 of the 103 agencies we audited never come up. Not mentioned, not cited, not selected. Zero of 4 models recommend them.

That is the single most striking finding in the first full-market census of AI recommendations for Charleston, South Carolina.

The ARO Index audited 686 Charleston-area businesses using its v2 methodology, which measures which businesses AI models actually select when a buyer asks with intent. Selection is different from mentions. A citation in a roundup is not a recommendation. We measure the moment an AI chooses.

- **686 businesses audited** across 4 AI models: ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity
- **166 businesses (24.2%) are invisible.** Zero of 4 models recommend them.
- **344 businesses (50%) earn full agreement**, recommended by every model that audited them.
- **Average ARO Score: 64.6** out of 100

Invisibility by industry

Invisibility is not evenly distributed. Some industries have largely solved AI recommendation. Others are being skipped entirely.

INDUSTRY	AUDITED	INVISIBLE	RATE
Marketing Agency	103	56	54%
Financial Services	20	10	50%
Real Estate	17	7	41%
Wellness & Massage	19	7	37%
Education	12	4	33%
Restaurant	31	9	29%
Fitness & Wellness	16	4	25%
Automotive Services	13	3	23%
Boutique & Retail	16	3	19%
Med Spa	12	2	17%
Home Services	180	29	16%
Landscaping	14	2	14%
Tours & Experiences	23	3	13%
Dentist	37	4	11%
Healthcare	45	4	9%
Hair Salon	12	1	8%
Law Firm	27	1	4%
Event Planning	11	0	0%

Categories with fewer than 10 audited businesses are excluded. Veterinary practices showed the highest observed rate (7 of 11 invisible) but the sample is too small to headline.

The professional services paradox

The industries that sell expertise in being found (marketing, financial services, real estate) are the most invisible. The industries built on referrals and directories (law, healthcare, dentistry) are the most recommended. AI models reward structured, verifiable, locally grounded information. Legal and medical practices have decades of it. Agencies mostly have portfolios and taglines.

Main Street is doing better than expected

Home Services, the largest category at 180 businesses, sits at 16% invisibility, well below the market average. Restaurants, tours, and salons all beat the average too. The businesses AI skips are not the small ones. They are the ones whose websites say a lot and verify little.

Methodology

This report uses v2 methodology exclusively. Every figure comes from live audits only. 4-model panel: ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity. A minimum of 3 models must complete for an audit to count. Location-verified queries. Latest audit per business. Selection, not mentions.

The audit does not create the score. It reveals it.

What this means

AI platforms are becoming a primary discovery layer for local buyers. For 1 in 4 Charleston businesses, that layer does not know they exist. The gap is not about size or budget. Event planners went 11 for 11. More than half of marketing agencies went 0 for 4.

The ARO Index will publish this census for additional markets through 2026, with Nashville next.

Every business in this report can look itself up on the public Charleston leaderboard at aroindex.com/charleston.

Any business can run a free audit at aroindex.com.

The ARO Index is an independent research platform tracking which local businesses AI models select across ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity. Data current as of July 2, 2026. Contact: therese@aroindex.com · aroindex.com