



CONTENTENGINE ORIGINAL RESEARCH

How People Find Complete Answers Across Search, AI and Social Media

A survey of how people research products and services, what they find missing, and what they do when the first answer is not enough.

200 respondents

MOST RECENT ONLINE PRODUCT OR SERVICE RESEARCH JOURNEY

Survey date: September 10, 2026

Fielded through Pollfish

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Finding information is easy. Finding a complete answer is not.

The survey describes a fragmented research environment in which people assemble answers across search, AI, websites, social platforms and human sources.

39.5%

said their main source answered completely

72.5%

used two or more sources

75.5%

called the overall process easy

What the results show

- Only 19% used a single source. Two sources was the most common journey at 50.5%.
- No channel owns discovery: search reached 56.5%, social media 48.5%, company sites 44.5% and AI assistants 33.5%.
- AI-mediated answers were the main source for 25% when AI assistants and AI-generated search summaries are combined.
- The leading omissions were price or total cost (33.5%) and comparisons with alternatives (22%).
- Users actively validate answers: 32% compared an independent source, while 26% opened support and 26% checked freshness.
- Only 15.5% most wanted a short answer. Richer formats such as explanations, instructions, comparisons and relevant examples were preferred by 58%.

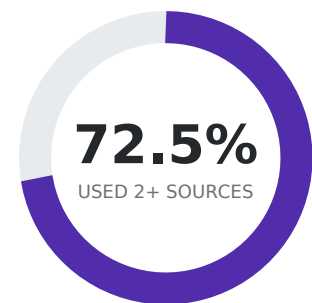
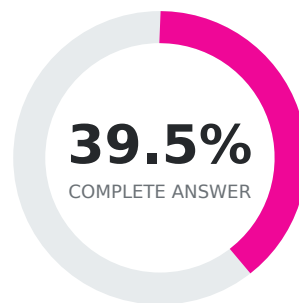
The report-level conclusion

The internet is effective at helping people continue looking. It is less consistent at giving them everything they need in one place.

THE CENTRAL FINDING

The modern information problem is answer assembly

The three headline measures only appear contradictory if discovery and completeness are treated as the same outcome.



How these findings fit together

Users are not necessarily getting stuck. They are building answers incrementally. One source can establish the basics, another can supply cost or comparison information, and a third can provide independent validation or firsthand experience.

That journey can still feel easy. A second search, another tab or an AI follow-up may require little effort, even when the first page failed to finish the job.

For publishers, the consequence is important: a user can consider the overall journey successful while an individual page loses the next stage of the decision because its answer is incomplete.

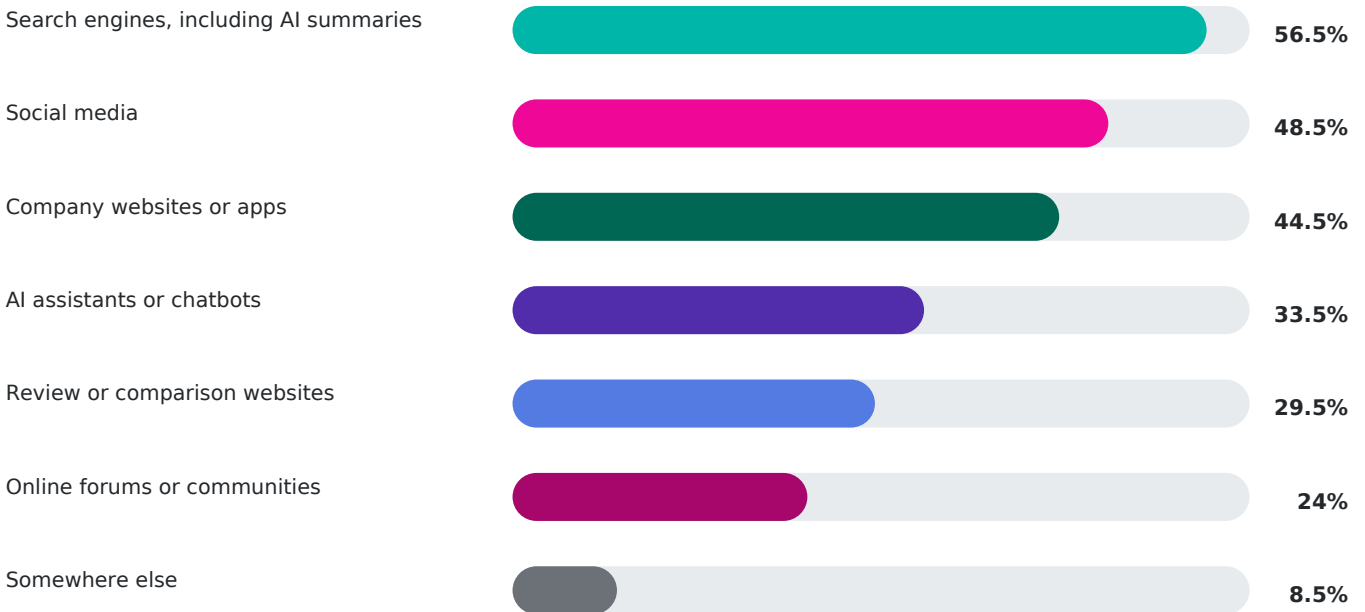
A broader definition of a content gap

A content gap exists when the information available to an audience does not fully satisfy what they need to understand, evaluate, verify or act on a subject. The gap may be missing depth, cost, comparison, context, evidence, drawbacks, instructions or currency, even when a page already covers the topic.

DISCOVERY

Information seeking is genuinely multichannel

Respondents could select every source used during their most recent product or service research journey.



Q1. Multiple selection; percentages do not sum to 100%.

What this means

Search remains the broadest discovery category, but it does not dominate the journey. Social media reached nearly half of respondents, company-owned destinations reached more than two in five, and one in three used a standalone AI assistant. Users move through an information ecosystem, not a single channel funnel.

PRIMARY CHANNEL

Social media led as the single main source

When forced to choose one main source, respondents spread across social, search, owned sites and AI interfaces.



Q2. Single selection.

AI is mainstream, but this is a fragmentation story

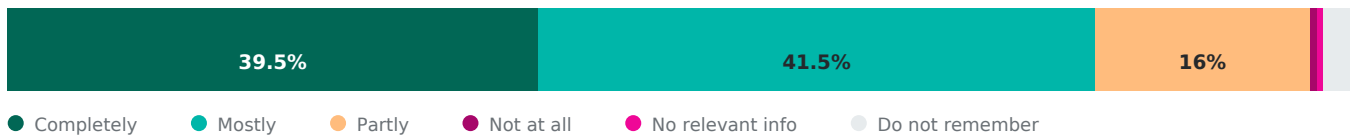
AI assistants (14%) and AI-generated search summaries (11%) combine to 25% of primary information seeking. That is substantial, but the survey does not show that AI has replaced search, social media or websites. It shows that these environments now overlap.

ANSWER QUALITY

Most answers helped. Far fewer completed the job.

The largest group said the main source mostly answered the question, which points to an opportunity in incomplete rather than unusable content.

How completely did the main source answer the question?



What was missing or unclear



Q4. Multiple selection; the final line is a response option, not an inferred total.

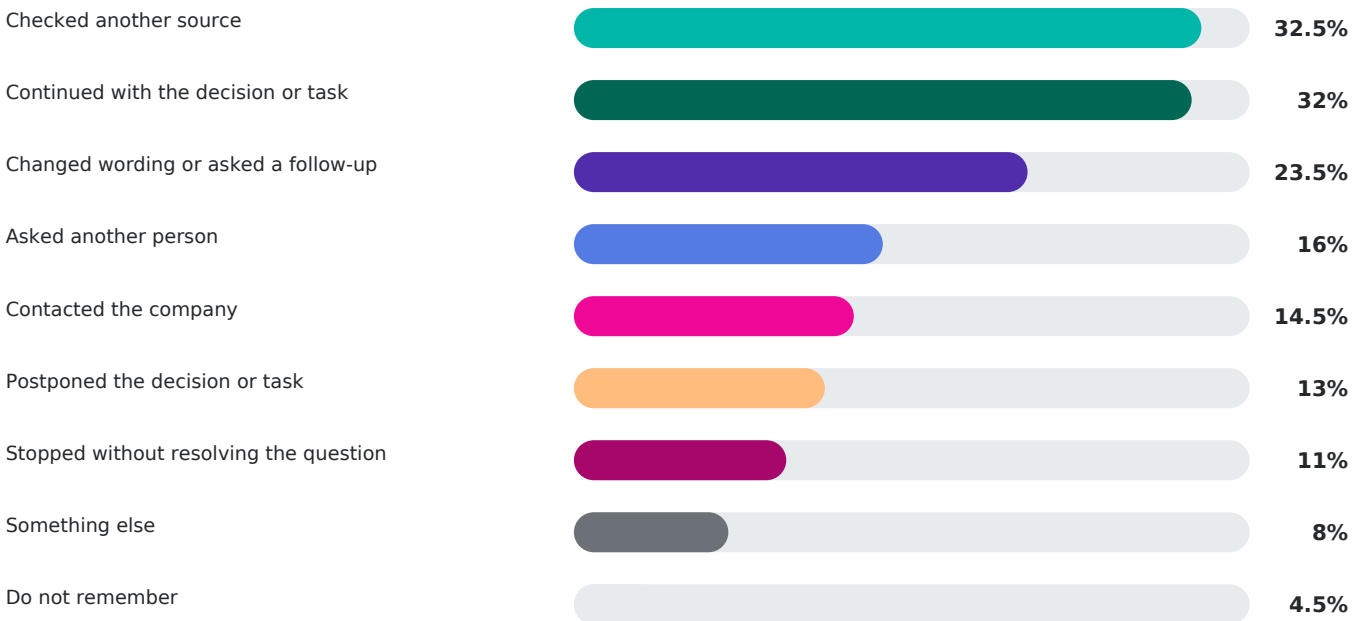
Completeness extends beyond topical relevance

A page can match a query and answer the immediate question while still omitting information needed to compare, trust or act. This helps explain why 39.5% reported a complete answer while only 25% said nothing was missing or unclear.

BEHAVIOUR

Incomplete answers create additional work

Respondents often continued the task, but they also rephrased, checked, contacted, postponed or abandoned.



Q5. Multiple selection.

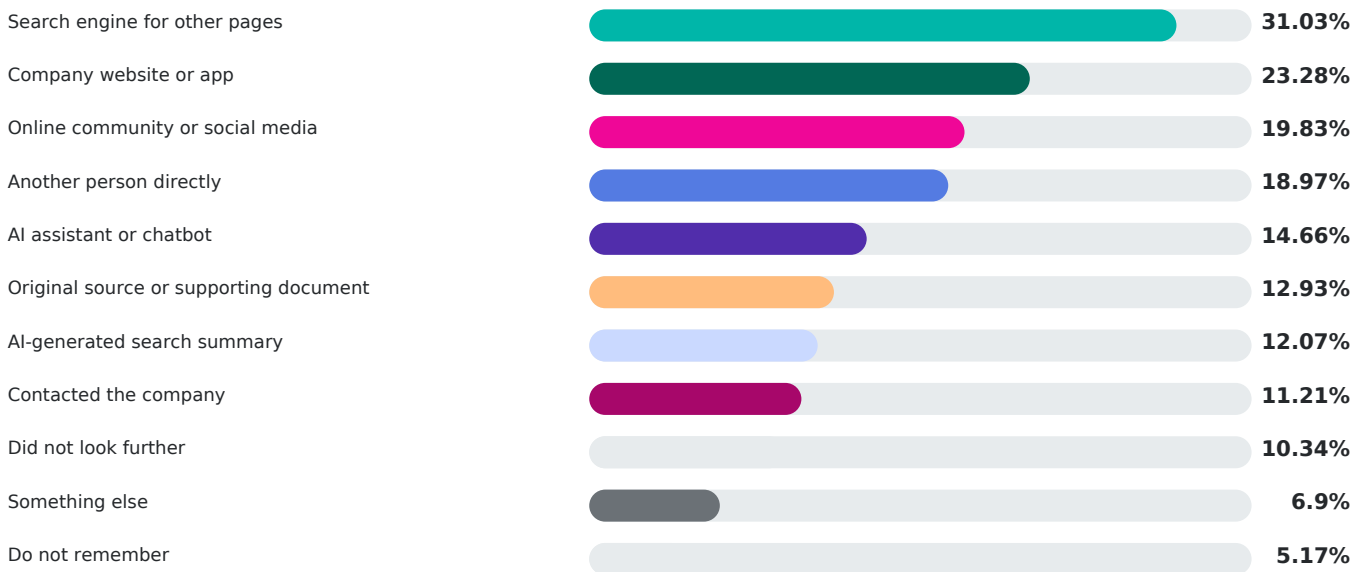
Follow-up behaviour reveals hidden demand

Nearly one in four changed their search wording or asked a follow-up question. The initial answer can teach a person enough to recognize the next question: cost, fit, comparison, drawback, freshness or evidence. Those follow-ups are direct signals of content demand.

RECOVERY PATHS

When the first answer falls short, people change both source and method

This follow-up question was shown to 116 respondents whose main source left the question partly or fully unanswered.



Q7. Multiple selection. Base: 116 respondents shown this question.

Search is also a recovery mechanism

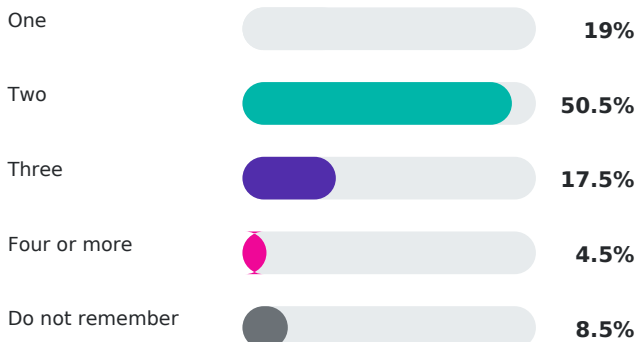
Search engines remain important after another source fails, while owned sites, communities, people and AI all participate in answer recovery. The survey cannot reconstruct individual paths, but it shows that users move freely between formats.

ASSEMBLY AND TRUST

Multiple sources do two jobs: complete the answer and validate it

Only 19% used one source, and many respondents separately checked whether the information was reliable.

Number of sources consulted

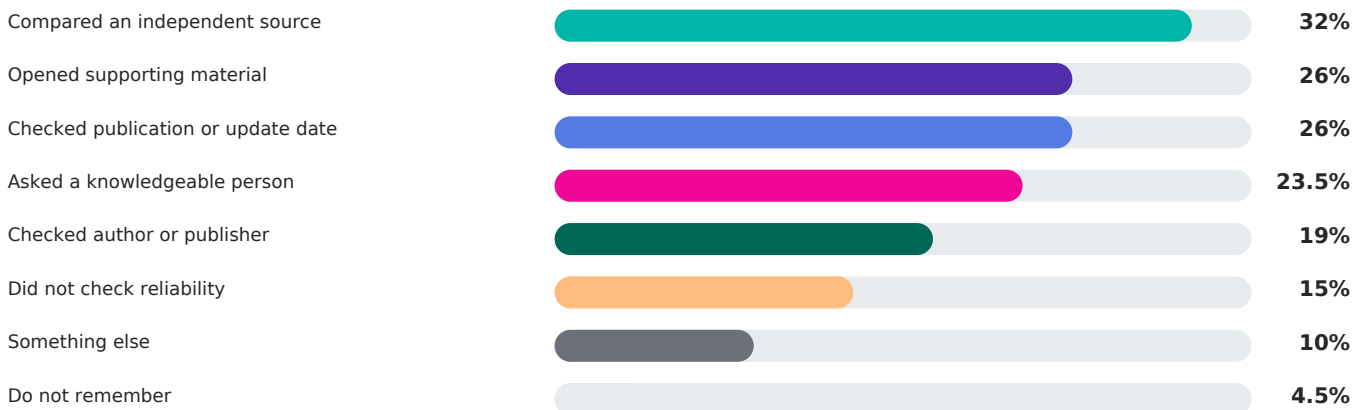


72.5%

consulted at least two sources

79.2% among those who remembered

How respondents checked reliability



Q8. Multiple selection.

Reliability is part of answering the question

Evidence, freshness and authorship are not decorative trust signals. For many users, they are part of what makes an answer complete enough to believe and use.

CONTENT FORMAT

A question does not automatically belong in an FAQ

Respondents most often wanted depth, instructions, comparison or context rather than another short answer.



Q9. Single selection.

58%

preferred a richer format

Explanation + instructions + example + comparison

Let the information need choose the format

Short answers matter, but they were the first choice for only 15.5%. A question may warrant an FAQ, a deeper article, a tutorial, a worked example, a comparison page or an update to existing content.

CONTENT STRATEGY

Six dimensions of answer completeness

The missing-information results provide a practical framework for auditing existing content beyond keyword coverage.

COMMERCIAL**Price and total cost**

Can the reader understand the complete economic commitment?

COMPARATIVE**Alternatives and tradeoffs**

Can the reader evaluate this option against realistic choices?

EVIDENTIARY**Proof and support**

Are claims backed by sources, data or visible reasoning?

BALANCED**Limitations and drawbacks**

Does the content explain constraints, risks and poor-fit cases?

TEMPORAL**Freshness and currency**

Can the reader tell when the information was produced or updated?

CONTEXTUAL**Fit, use and application**

Does the answer help a person apply it to their own circumstances?

The audit question

Do not ask only whether a topic is covered. Ask whether the page carries the user far enough through understanding, evaluation, verification and action that they do not need another source to finish the answer.

SEO, AI AND SOCIAL

Optimize the answer, not only the channel

The evidence supports an overlapping content system rather than a contest between search and AI.

SEARCH**Discovery and recovery**

Search was the broadest source used and the most common route after an incomplete answer.

AI ANSWERS**Summary and follow-up**

One quarter named an AI assistant or AI-generated search summary as the main source.

SOCIAL + COMMUNITY**Signals and experience**

Social media led as the single main source and communities also helped people recover answers.

OWNED CONTENT**Depth and authority**

Company websites were used by 44.5% and were the second most common recovery destination.

Measurement implications

- A page can be a discovery source, a deeper explanation, an independent check or the comparison immediately before a decision.
- Rankings alone cannot show every role. Search visibility, AI visibility, referrals, branded search, engagement, citations and assisted conversions may capture different parts of the journey.
- The survey does not test ranking factors or attribution models. These are strategic implications, not direct causal findings.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Turn the findings into a content decision

A content gap can require a new asset, an expansion to an existing page or better support for an answer that already exists.

01

SIGNAL

No answer exists

ACTION

Create

Publish a new page or asset that directly answers the unmet question.

02

SIGNAL

The answer lacks depth

ACTION

Expand

Add cost, comparison, evidence, limitations, examples or instructions.

03

SIGNAL

The answer is hard to trust

ACTION

Support

Add sources, authorship, update dates, methodology and balanced context.

04

SIGNAL

The answer is in the wrong format

ACTION

Reshape

Move from a short FAQ to a guide, tutorial, comparison or example as needed.

05

SIGNAL

The question is emerging

ACTION

Monitor

Track search refinements, social conversations, support questions and AI follow-ups.

Priority should reflect consequence as well as prevalence

The most common gap is not automatically the most urgent. Combine frequency with decision impact, business relevance, current performance and the effort required to close the gap.

METHODOLOGY

How to read these findings

The report uses the unweighted respondent percentages shown in the supplied Pollfish topline report.

SURVEY DATE	September 10, 2026
SAMPLE	200 completed responses
RECALL FRAME	The most recent occasion the respondent looked online for information about a product or service
REPORTING BASIS	Unweighted respondent percentages; counts are included in the appendix
QUESTION TYPES	Single-selection and multiple-selection questions, as marked
FOLLOW-UP BASE	Q7 was answered by 116 respondents whose main source left the question partly or fully unanswered

Limitations

- The results are specific to product and service information journeys and should not automatically be generalized to every kind of online research.
- The supplied report contains aggregate topline, not respondent-level cross-tabs. It cannot establish whether one source type produced more complete or reliable answers than another.
- Percentages from multiple-selection questions should not be added to estimate unique respondents unless the options are explicitly non-overlapping.
- Q7 reports 116 completes. The preceding distribution would appear to imply approximately 117 less-than-complete responses, so the routing denominator should not be reverse-engineered without raw data.
- Stratified results are included in the Pollfish export, but the supplied report does not provide enough methodological

Source document

Pollfish, Finding Complete Answers Across Search and AI, survey report, September 2026.

APPENDIX: COMPLETE TOPLINES

Toplines: questions 1-3

Counts and unweighted respondent percentages from the Pollfish export. Multiple-selection questions are marked.

Q1 Sources used

Multiple selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Search engines incl. AI summaries	113	56.50%
AI assistants/chatbots	67	33.50%
Company websites/apps	89	44.50%
Social media	97	48.50%
Forums/communities	48	24.00%
Review/comparison sites	59	29.50%
Somewhere else	17	8.50%

Q2 Main source

Single selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Traditional search results/snippets	39	19.50%
AI-generated search summary	22	11.00%
AI assistant/chatbot	28	14.00%
Company website/app	35	17.50%
Social media	48	24.00%
Forum/community	9	4.50%
Review/comparison website	10	5.00%
Somewhere else	4	2.00%
Do not remember	5	2.50%

Q3 Completeness of main source

Single selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Completely	79	39.50%
Mostly	83	41.50%
Partly	32	16.00%
Not at all	1	0.50%
No relevant information	1	0.50%
Do not remember	4	2.00%

APPENDIX: COMPLETE TOPLINES

Toplines: questions 4-5

Counts and unweighted respondent percentages from the Pollfish export. Multiple-selection questions are marked.

Q4 Missing or unclear information

Multiple selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Price/total cost	67	33.50%
Suited circumstances	28	14.00%
How it worked/how to use	28	14.00%
Limitations/drawbacks	31	15.50%
Compared with alternatives	44	22.00%
Evidence supporting claims	32	16.00%
Still current	31	15.50%
Something else	22	11.00%
Nothing missing/unclear	50	25.00%
Do not remember	7	3.50%

Q5 Action after main source

Multiple selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Continued decision/task	64	32.00%
Changed wording/follow-up	47	23.50%
Checked another source	65	32.50%
Contacted company	29	14.50%
Asked another person	32	16.00%
Postponed decision/task	26	13.00%
Stopped unresolved	22	11.00%
Something else	16	8.00%
Do not remember	9	4.50%

APPENDIX: COMPLETE TOPLINES

Toplines: questions 6-8

Counts and unweighted respondent percentages from the Pollfish export. Multiple-selection questions are marked.

Q6 Number of sources

Single selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
One	38	19.00%
Two	101	50.50%
Three	35	17.50%
Four or more	9	4.50%
Do not remember	17	8.50%

Q7 Where respondents looked next

Multiple selection | base n=116

Response	Count	Respondents
AI assistant/chatbot	17	14.66%
AI search summary	14	12.07%
Search for other pages	36	31.03%
Original/supporting source	15	12.93%
Company website/app	27	23.28%
Community/social	23	19.83%
Contacted company	13	11.21%
Asked person directly	22	18.97%
Something else	8	6.90%
Did not look further	12	10.34%
Do not remember	6	5.17%

Q8 Reliability checks

Multiple selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Opened supporting source	52	26.00%
Compared independent source	64	32.00%
Checked author/publisher	38	19.00%
Checked publication/update date	52	26.00%
Asked knowledgeable person	47	23.50%
Something else	20	10.00%
Did not check reliability	30	15.00%
Do not remember	9	4.50%

APPENDIX: COMPLETE TOPLINES

Toplines: questions 9-10

Counts and unweighted respondent percentages from the Pollfish export. Multiple-selection questions are marked.

Q9 Most helpful information format

Single selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Short direct answer	31	15.50%
Detailed explanation	45	22.50%
Step-by-step instructions	26	13.00%
Comparison	22	11.00%
Relevant example	23	11.50%
Follow-up opportunity	13	6.50%
Something else	8	4.00%
Already had everything	24	12.00%
Do not remember	8	4.00%

Q10 Overall ease of finding information

Single selection | base n=200

Response	Count	Respondents
Very easy	70	35.00%
Somewhat easy	81	40.50%
Neither	26	13.00%
Somewhat difficult	13	6.50%
Very difficult	3	1.50%
Do not remember	7	3.50%