

The Earned Media Target List

If your own website is not what gets you cited, where do you actually spend your time? This worksheet answers that with named targets instead of "build authority."

Ninety minutes, once. Then you have a list you work through for the next six months.

Why this exists

Four independent sources now say roughly the same thing:

- Over **85%** of non-paid AI citations come from earned media, not vendor websites (Muck Rack, over 1 million AI prompts, 2026)
- **65.3%** of ChatGPT's top-cited pages come from high-authority domains (Ahrefs, 2025)
- **88%** of Google AI Mode citations do not appear in the organic top 10 (Moz, 2026)
- **37%** of AI-cited domains do not appear in traditional search results at all (Zhang et al., arXiv, 2025)

And in one documented citation study, a single third-party roundup post was cited on **7 of 15** buyer queries, while the target brand's own site was cited **once out of roughly 300** citations.

The conclusion is uncomfortable and useful: **where else your name appears matters more than how polished your own site is.** This worksheet finds the "where else."

1 Harvest the sources

30 minutes

Open ChatGPT with web search on, temporary chat on. Take your five most important buyer questions. Ask each one, then ask **"which sources did you use?"** Log everything. Do not filter yet.

[illegible]

Type options: Review platform · Community (Reddit, forums) · Publisher (media, blog, roundup) · Competitor · Documentation · Directory

2 Find the structural ones

Now sort. **Count how many different queries each source appeared on**, not how many times total.

A source cited ten times on one query is a niche win. A source appearing across four different queries is doing structural work in your category, and getting into it is worth more than anything you could publish yourself this quarter.

Structural sources (appeared on 3+ queries):

Recurring sources (appeared on 2 queries):

3 Read the top one properly

Open your number one structural source and actually read it. Not to copy it. To understand why it gets cited.

What format is it? (roundup, comparison, guide, thread, review page)

What specific claim or data does it contain that you could not find elsewhere?

Is there an obvious way in? (inclusion criteria, submission form, named author, an outdated entry)

Are you in it? If not, why not, honestly?

4 Build the target list

Turn sources into named targets. For each, one specific next action, not "reach out."

[illegible]

What "specific ask" means, by type

- **Review platform** → claim and complete your profile, then ask three recent clients for a review that names the specific problem you solved. "Great service" is unusable to a model. The specific problem is what gets retrieved.
- **Community** → find the specific thread that keeps getting cited. Read it. Decide honestly whether useful participation or better public documentation is the right response. Do not astroturf, it reads as what it is and it damages the thing you are trying to build.
- **Publisher / roundup** → email the author. Short, specific, useful. "I noticed your roundup on X does not include anyone doing Y. Here is what we do and one client result. Happy to send more if useful."
- **Directory** → just get listed. Lowest effort, fastest result, most commonly skipped.
- **Competitor page** → you cannot get into it. But read what they published that you did not. A competitor comparison page framing its own alternatives is frequently the highest-cited asset in a category, and there is usually room for a second one.

The honest timeline

Set expectations now so you do not quit in week three.

Target type	Realistic time to first citation impact
Directory listings	Weeks
Review profile plus specific reviews	Weeks to a couple of months
Getting into an existing roundup	One to three months, depending on the author's update cycle
Community presence that gets cited	Months, and only if the participation is real
Earned press or analyst mention	Months

Nothing here is fast. That is why starting this week matters more than doing it perfectly. And once a source starts citing you, citation history becomes its own signal, which is why the operators who start now compound an advantage that gets progressively harder to close.

Re-run this quarterly

Citation sources shift as models update their search behavior. A source that dominates today can fade. Quarterly re-runs keep the target list current instead of six months stale.

Want this run properly?

The AI Visibility Audit maps every query where AI cites a competitor and not you, across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI, and hands back the fix plan in priority order. Free scan first.

closermethod.com/seo

Sources: Muck Rack / Generative Pulse, "What is AI Reading?", 2026. Ahrefs analysis of ChatGPT's most-cited pages, 2025. Moz AI Mode citation analysis, 2026. Zhang et al., arXiv, December 2025. Sara Soleymani, citation monitoring study, Medium, July 2026.

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