

Zach Dembo for Congress

In an ad called "Basically the Same," featuring Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear and Zach Dembo, Dembo groused, "I thought that we got rid of this guy," gesturing to a cardboard cutout of former Gov. Matt Bevin. "Yeah, tell me about it," Beshear replied.

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BESHEAR

figure himself, also joined Dembo on the campaign trail to talk about his decision to expand Medicaid coverage to hundreds of thousands of Kentucky's working poor. Looming cuts to Medicaid under Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act was a frequent theme for Dembo.

"Dembo sprang out of the starting gate with an amazing amount of support from people in Beshear's orbit, given that he was a novice when it comes to electoral office," said Stephen Voss, a political scientist at the University of Kentucky.

Most Democrats in Kentucky politics are grateful to get a single grip-and-grin photo of themselves shaking hands with Beshear, to be used in a campaign photo, Voss said.

By contrast, Dembo and Beshear were seen together a lot, he said.

APPEARING TOGETHER ON TV

In one TV spot called "Basically the Same," Dembo and Beshear mocked former Republican Gov. Matt Bevin by carrying around a cardboard cutout of him and comparing him to Dembo's Republican opponent, Ralph Alvarado, who was Bevin's 2019 running mate.

Beshear defeated the Bevin/Alvarado ticket, as he snarkily referenced in the ad's conclusion.

In another ad that aired in the campaign's final days, called "My Guy," Beshear sat with Dembo over glasses of beer while praising his protégé's record as "a Navy vet and tough-on-crime prosecutor." At the end, the two men clinked their beer glasses together.

This recognition made a difference.

Unlike many other Democrats who have sought federal office in Kentucky, Dembo was not pinched for cash. His campaign reported raising $3.2 million as of Oct. 14. Outside groups — including one tied to Beshear, In This Together PAC — spent several million dollars in the 6th District either to support Dembo or to attack Alvarado, making Dembo competitive.

"I can't give you an exact percentage obviously, but I would say probably half the margin of victory in that race could be attributed to Beshear's support," said Don Dugi, a retired political scientist at Transylvania University in Lexington.

"Beshear has a high level of popularity, which is perhaps surprising in this red state," Dugi said. "But he's got a good record and is generally well respected. And he's campaigning for (Dembo), and he endorsed him."

MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP

At Dembo's election night party in downtown Lexington, Beshear took the stage to introduce the winner and lavish still more compliments on him.

"Tonight, here in Kentucky, we elected a deeply decent, pragmatic and exceptional leader," Beshear told the cheering crowd. "Zach worked in my administration. So I can tell you, Congress will only be the second-hardest job he's ever had."

"I have seen his drive up close and personal," the governor continued. "He went on to serve as an assistant U.S. attorney, but he had so much integrity he refused for his position to be weaponized. He said no to Donald Trump. He's going to have a lot of chances to say no to Donald Trump now. I know a good public servant when I see one. He's going to be an exceptional member of Congress."

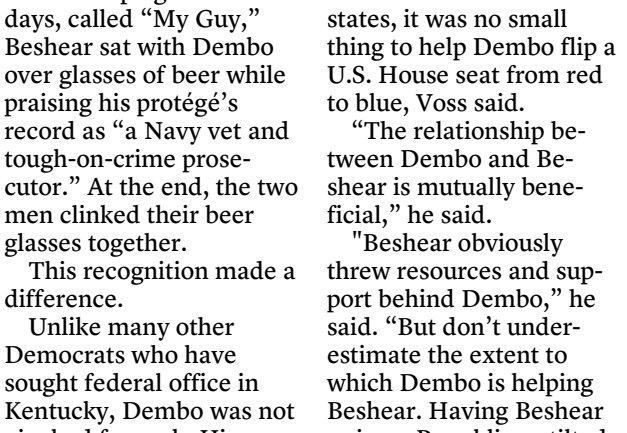
And Dembo made sure to thank his ex-boss for his support minutes later in his own speech.

For Beshear, a presumed Democratic presidential candidate who wants to show he can appeal to voters in conservative states, it was no small thing to help Dembo flip a U.S. House seat from red to blue, Voss said.

"The relationship between Dembo and Beshear is mutually beneficial," he said.

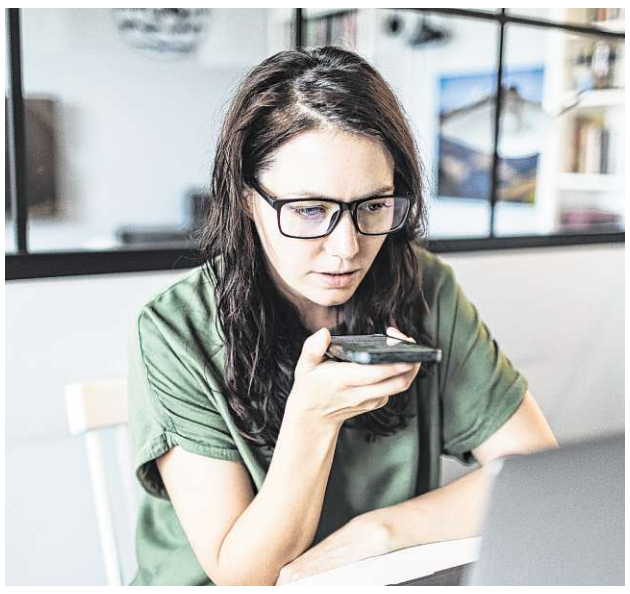
"Beshear obviously threw resources and support behind Dembo," he said. "But don't underestimate the extent to which Dembo is helping Beshear. Having Beshear swing a Republican-tilted district to the Democrats in Kentucky gives him a concrete example of what he's promising to do for the Democrats more broadly."

"Beshear's introduction (for Dembo on Election Night) was not a typical introduction given to an election victor," Voss said. "It was one part of Beshear's campaign speech, stressing the continuity between the two of them, focused on problem-solving, focused on unity instead of the divisiveness of the past. Andy Beshear helped promote Dembo as a candidate cast in his own mold."



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Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear gave his official endorsement for Zach Dembo for Congress at The Burl in the Lexington Distillery District on June 9, 2026.



JULPO Getty Images

A recent study found that the share of consumers who used an AI tool to find a local business within the past 30 days rose from 9% in 2025 to 52% this year – almost a sixfold increase in a single year.

Americans are using AI to find local businesses. Most don't trust it yet

BY DAMIAN ROLLISON
For SOCi.ai via Stacker

For years, local search followed a rough sequence, driven in large part by the dominance of search as a channel and Google as its dominant provider. A consumer searches using keywords, evaluates a set of results, chooses one, and converts.

That model is breaking down. According to SOCi.ai's 2026 Local Discovery Index, an annual survey of more than 1,000 U.S. consumers now in its third year, people no longer move through a simple linear funnel when they choose a local business. Instead, consumers increasingly move between channels, discovering a business in one place, verifying information somewhere else, and making a final decision based on a combination of sources. The most dramatic evidence of this newly fragmented landscape is the rise of AI search. The share of consumers who used an AI tool to find a local business in the last 30 days rose from 9% in 2025 to 52% in 2026, close to a sixfold increase in a single year.

But the data also shows that usage and trust are moving in opposite directions. The more consumers rely on AI, the more they double-check it using other sources like search and social. As consumers move between platforms to validate information, consistency across channels becomes increasingly important for businesses.

Three years of data make the AI trend line clear. According to previous editions of the Local Discovery Index, AI search capability had barely reached ChatGPT, and almost no consumers used it to find local businesses in 2024. By early 2025, roughly 19% had tried an AI search. In 2026, 60% of consumers use AI as a frequent discovery channel, and 52% use it specifically for local business research.

While AI adoption is on the rise, it is not even across the population. Regular AI use rises from 47% among consumers earning under $50,000 a year to 76% among those earning $100,000 or more, according to the index report. By generation, millennials are the heaviest users at 63%, ahead of Gen Z (49%) and Gen X (48%), with baby boomers far behind at 11%. The consumers most likely to research a local business through AI are, generally speaking, millennials with money to spend.

The growth of AI isn't tied to a single platform, either. Consumers are encountering AI-powered recommendations across a growing range of tools, sometimes intentionally and sometimes as part of experiences they already use every day. For local search and discovery, consumers interact with AI in two ways: seeking it out directly (57% use ChatGPT, while 51% use Gemini), and encountering it passively inside tools they already use (51% have seen an AI answer at the top of Google results, 35% have clicked into Google's AI Mode, and roughly a third have encountered AI content on Meta's platforms or in mapping apps).

Usage of AI is climbing sharply, but trust is not. Among consumers who use AI tools, 67% say they've been given wrong information about a local business at least once, and 30% say that bad information caused a real inconvenience. Only 27% say their trust in AI has grown over the past year, meaning 73% haven't seen their confidence increase. In fact, 23% of respondents reported that their trust in AI has actually declined since last year.

The trust gap spurs consumers to verify AI results before taking action. When an AI tool recommends a business, 81% of consumers take some kind of verification step before contacting the business directly, checking reviews (33%), checking the business's social media (20%), searching to confirm details independently (16%), or checking multiple sources (12%). Only 19% go straight from an AI recommendation to contacting the business.

This shows that appearing in the AI answer is necessary but not sufficient on its own. A business that appears in an AI-generated response but has thin, outdated reviews or an inactive social presence risks losing the customer at the very next step. AI visibility and reputation aren't separate problems to manage; they're stages of the same evaluation process.

Where consumers start their search, and what ultimately determines their choice, both vary meaningfully by industry.

Search leads as the starting point across every category studied, but the runner-up channel shifts. AI-first journeys are most common in healthcare (21%) and grocery (19%). Social is surprisingly popular as a starting point for financial services (20%). Mapping apps are the most common entry point for fuel and auto searches (25%), which tracks with how those searches tend to be need-driven and location-specific.

Decision factors are split by category as well. Reviews and word of mouth lead in five of the eight categories studied, from restaurants (41%) to healthcare (38%). But visual content is the most popular deciding factor for apartment searches (43%), whereas practical details like hours and location matter most for grocery (37%) and fuel (36%). Brand credentials carry the most weight in financial services (34%). A one-size-fits-all local visibility strategy will not properly account for the factors consumers prioritize.

Reviews remain the filter that decides which businesses make a consumer's shortlist. This is because reviews are, in effect, the Reddit of local: the single biggest readily available source of peer feedback across a broad range of industries and geographies.

According to the Local Discovery Index, 99% of consumers read reviews before a first visit at least some of the time, and 68% do so always or most of the time. That's consistent with what the study has found in prior years: Reputation isn't just a ranking signal, it's closer to a gating factor.

What's changed is how much consumers reward engagement, not just star count. Seventy-two percent are more likely to choose a business that responds to its reviews, up from 65% in 2025. Sixty-five percent say they'd be more likely to revisit a business after a helpful response to a negative review. And 87% say they'd be more likely to revise a negative review to a positive one if the business responds helpfully. These signals indicate that consumers are likely to reward businesses that are more attentive to their concerns.

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