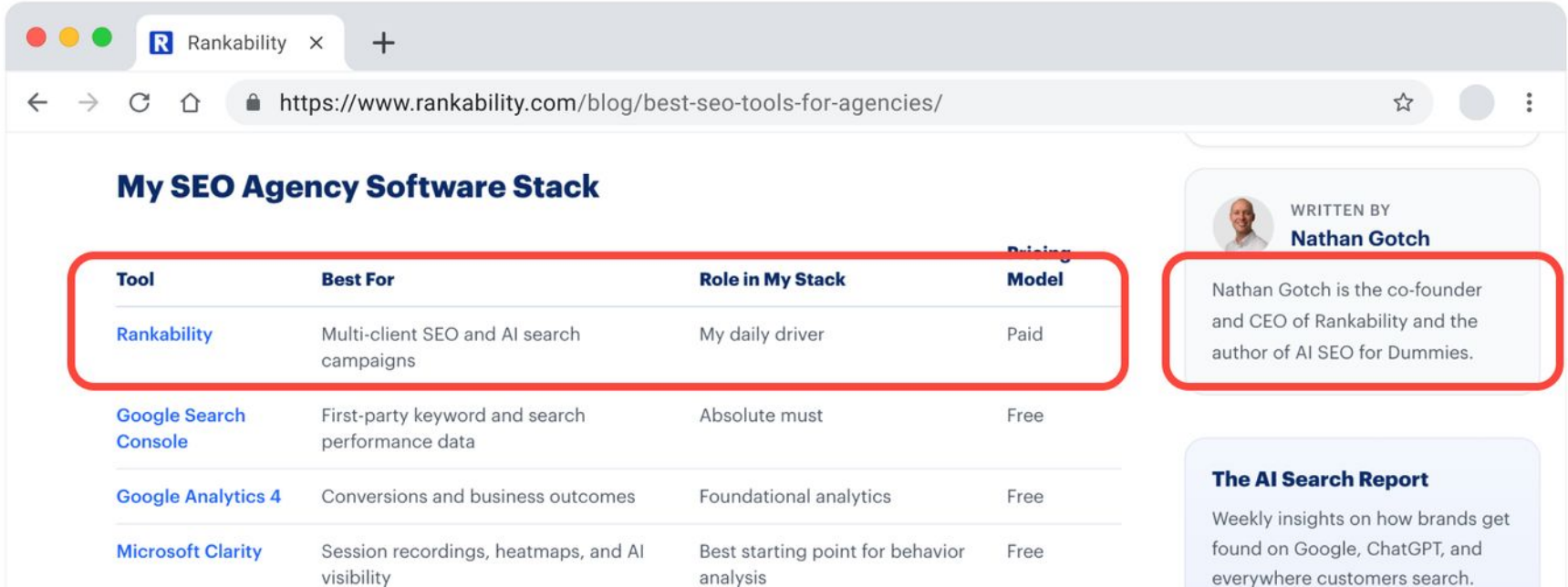
WHO WRITES THE LIST?

Story by Michał Suski

Surfer

GUESS WHO'S #1 ON THE LIST

Every brand has a "Best X tools" page.



TWO STUDIES, ONE QUESTION

238.6M

Citations across 8,677 reports and 5 engines, Jan-Sep 2026: how lists perform

201,534

Self-promo pages cited Jul–Sep 2026 in 5,162 reports: what the best ones do

190

Page factors per page: URL, HTML, text, AI detector, LLM content rubric

Study A: lists in AI answers, Jan–Sep 2026. Study B: self-promo pages, Jul–Sep 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

TWO KINDS OF LISTS

SELF-PROMO LIST



"Best X tools"
on x.com

THIRD-PARTY LIST



"Best X tools"
on a review
site or blog

Lists compare 2+ brands

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

TWO WAYS A LIST CAN WIN

THE PAGE GETS CITED

Citation frequency: The share of the report's answers that cite the page.

YOUR BRAND GETS NAMED

Mention rate: The share of the report's answers that name the page's publisher.

Both measured per report: same niche, same prompts

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

FOUR ACTS

I	IS A LIST STILL WORTH WRITING?	Lists in AI answers, and what a cited one buys you.
II	TWO SCOREBOARDS	Getting the page cited vs getting your name said.
III	GET THE PAGE CITED	What the most-cited lists have, and what keeps them.
IV	GET YOUR BRAND NAMED	What puts your name in the answer, and keeps it there.

Acts III and IV are the two playbooks

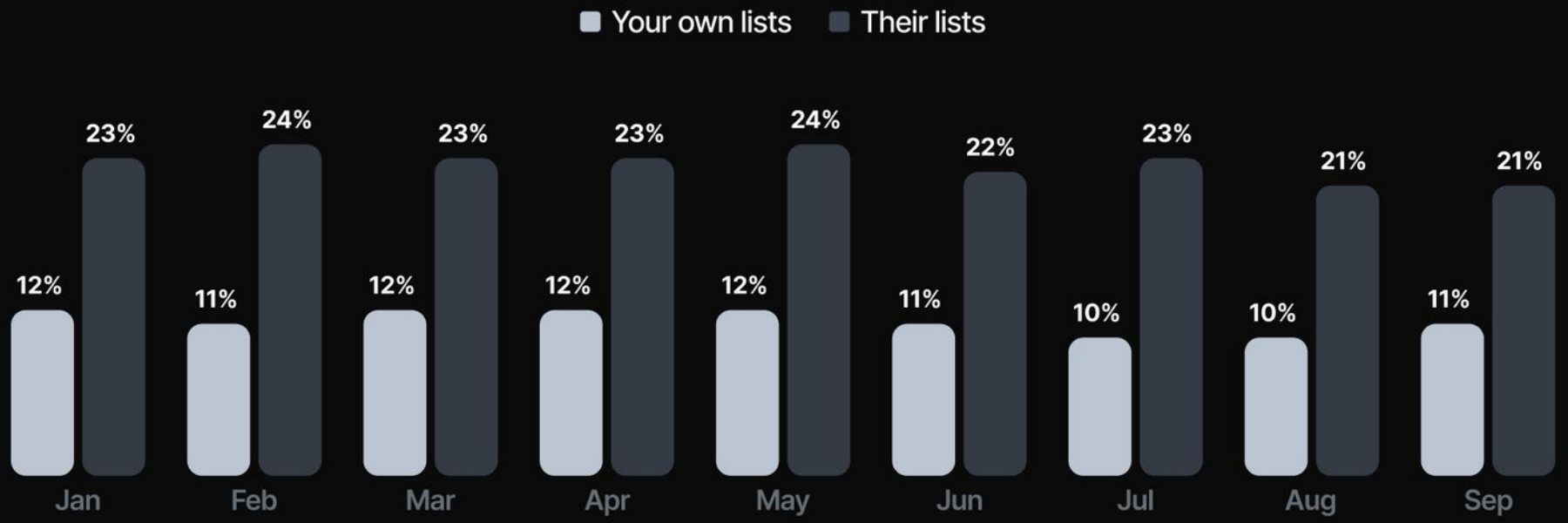
Data From Surfer AI Tracker

ACT I

IS A LIST STILL WORTH WRITING?

Lists aren’t losing ground. So what does a cited one buy you?

LISTS AREN'T LOSING GROUND



Share of citations. Same 546 reports, Jan–Sep 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CITED LIST GET NAMED YOU NAMED

Same prompt, same engine, same month



Same prompt, same engine, same month. n = 194k + 1.63M paired cells, Jan–13 Oct 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

YOUR LIST LIFTS NAMED YOUR RIVALS TOO

+3.7 PP For each competitor on your own list



Same prompt, same engine, same month. n = 194k + 1.63M paired cells, Jan–13 Oct 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

ON THEIR LIST, NAMED EVERYONE GAINS

+6.3 PP

For you, when a third-party list that names you is cited

+5.7 PP

For each competitor listed next to you

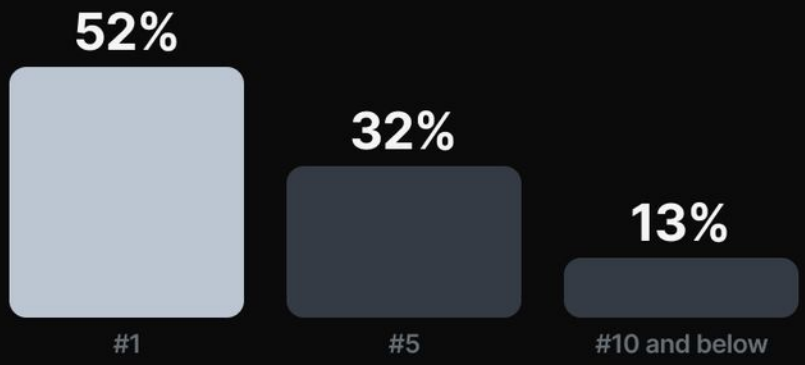
Almost the same lift. The category gets visible, not just you.

Same prompt, same engine, same month. n = 194k + 1.63M paired cells, Jan–13 Oct 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

PICK YOUR RIVALS. FIGHT FOR #1.

Your brand named, by its slot on someone else's list



Third-party lists, brand named in answers citing the list. 5% citation sample. Jan–Sep 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

LISTS AREN'T LOSING GROUND, AND A CITED ONE STILL LIFTS YOU.

SO: HOW DO YOU WRITE IT?

THE PAGE FADES, THE NAME STAYS

NAMED

CITED



74,718 + 146,151 pairs. Self-promo pages first cited Jan–14 Jul 2026. 12-week follow-up

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

ACT II

TWO SCOREBOARDS

201,534 pages

BEST 5% VS WORST 5%

In every report.

01

WITHIN A REPORT

Same niche, same prompts: only pages competing for the same answers

02

03

04

201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

BEST 5% VS WORST 5%

In every report.

01

WITHIN A REPORT

Same niche, same prompts: only pages competing for the same answers

02

TOP 5% VS BOTTOM 5%

By citation frequency, then again by mention rate

03

04

201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

BEST 5% VS WORST 5%

In every report.

01

WITHIN A REPORT

Same niche, same prompts: only pages competing for the same answers

02

TOP 5% VS BOTTOM 5%

By citation frequency, then again by mention rate

03

190 FACTORS

Effect size per factor: +0.3 = a top page beats a bottom page 65% of the time

04

201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

BEST 5% VS WORST 5%

In every report.

01

WITHIN A REPORT

Same niche, same prompts: only pages competing for the same answers

02

TOP 5% VS BOTTOM 5%

By citation frequency, then again by mention rate

03

190 FACTORS

Effect size per factor: +0.3 = a top page beats a bottom page 65% of the time

04

PLUS CORRELATION

Rank correlation within report across all 426k page × report pairs

201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CITATIONS COST YOU MENTIONS

	PAGE CITED	BRAND NAMED
Brands on the list	+0.15	−0.10
“vs” in title	−0.05	+0.11
“best” in title	+0.05	−0.11
Mentions of 2026	+0.04	−0.11
Early query answer (LLM)	+0.14	−0.06
Search intent alignment (LLM)	+0.14	−0.06
Key takeaways summary (LLM)	+0.08	−0.10
URL has query parameters	−0.08	+0.07

426,447 page × report pairs. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

LONG LISTS GET YOU CITED.

Brands compared

11 VS 8

Median, most-cited vs least-cited pages. The strongest of 190 factors.

35,288 pages + 426,447 page × report pairs. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

SHORT LISTS GET YOU NAMED.

Publisher named

50% VS 34%

With 1–2 brands on the list vs 8+. Every rival is one more name the answer can pick.

35,288 pages + 426,447 page × report pairs. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

NUMBER OF BRANDS ON THE LIST



8,677 reports. 238.6M citations. Jan–Sep 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

47% OF CITATIONS TO THIRD-PARTY LISTS GO TO LISTS WITH 26+ BRANDS.

8,677 reports. 238.6M citations. Jan–Sep 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

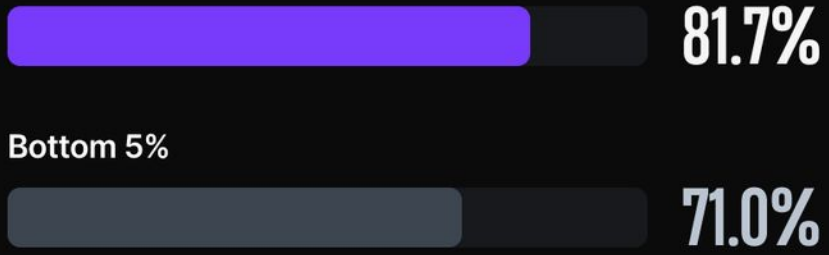
AI WRITING GETS CITED

NAMED

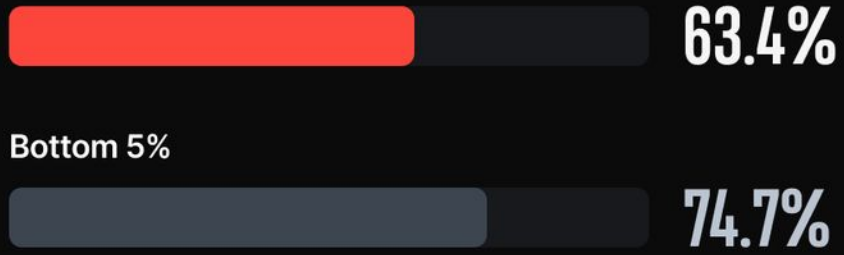
CITED

Share of pages flagged as AI-written

Most-cited vs least-cited pages



Best vs worst pages for mentions



21,125 + 31,351 English pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

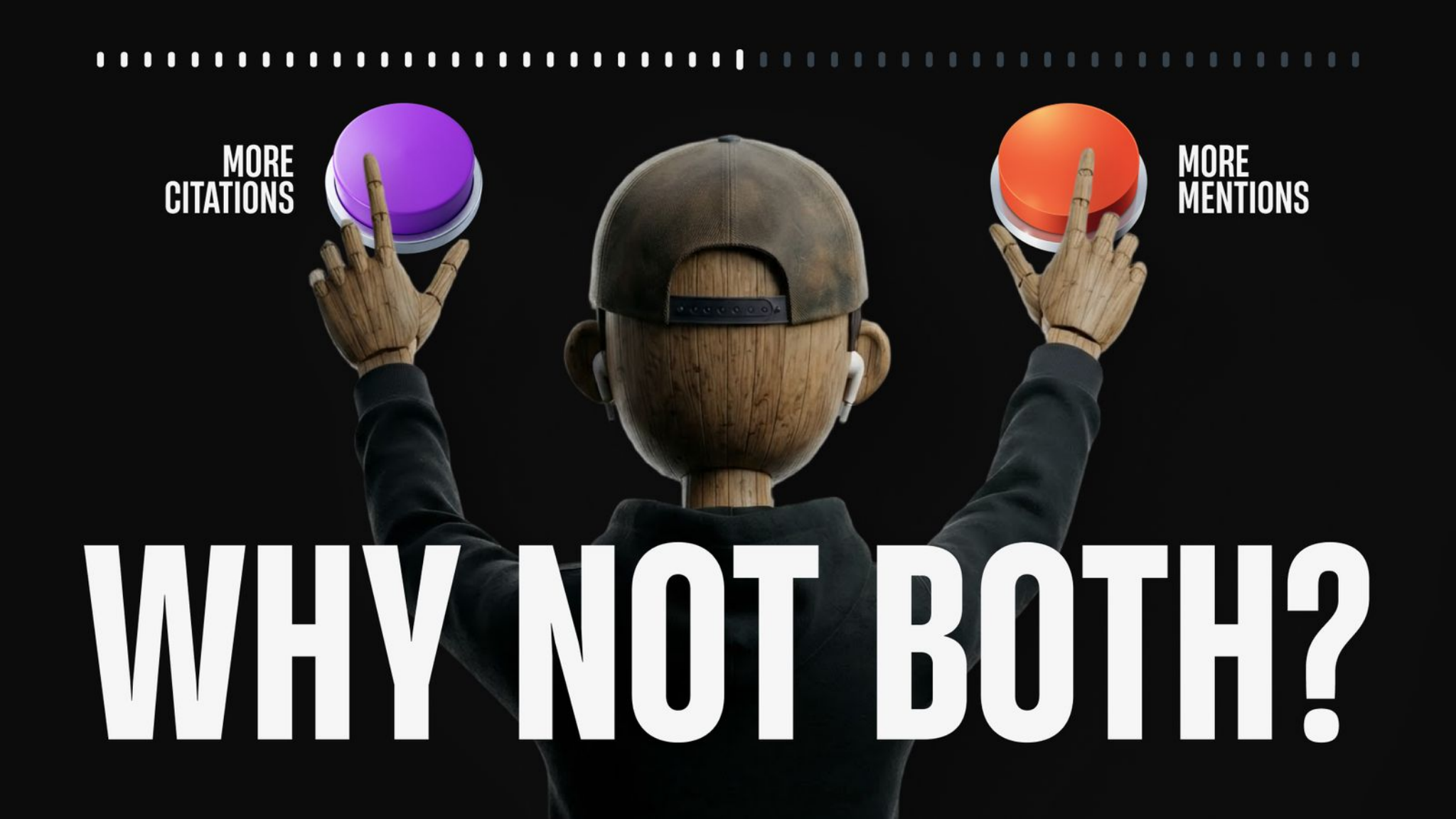
GETTING YOUR LIST CITED AND GETTING YOUR BRAND MENTIONED ARE TWO DIFFERENT GAMES.



MY PAGE GOT CITED 40 TIMES



THEY SAID MY NAME ONCE


MORE CITATIONS
MORE MENTIONS
WHY NOT BOTH?

ACT III

FACTORS TO GET THE PAGE CITED

What the most-cited self-promo lists have that the least-cited don’t.

A CITATION OPENS THE DOOR

Step 1 CITED

AI CITES YOUR LIST

Your page shows up as a source in the answer.

That alone is just a link.

Step 2 NAMED

57% → 73%

Answers that cite your list name your brand far more often.

Same prompt, same engine, same month. +16 PP

193,944 paired cells. Own self-promo lists, Jan–13 Oct 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

SCANNABLE LISTS GET CITED

CITED

...with more options. Effect size, most-cited 5% vs least-cited 5%



35,288 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CITED

TABLES AND BOLD VERDICTS

Most-cited 5% vs least-cited 5%

Table cells (median)	30	vs	0
Bold spans	41	vs	24
List items	40	vs	23
H2 headings	8	vs	6

35,288 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

LESS PROSE, NO SALES LINES

CITED

Most-cited 5% vs least-cited 5%

Of words sit in plain paragraphs	72.5%	vs	78.5%
Words per paragraph	30.1	vs	32.8
CTA phrases per 1,000 words	0	vs	0.13

35,288 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

ANSWER FIRST, SAY WHO IT'S FOR

CITED

Most-cited 5% vs least-cited 5%

Answer the query early	96%	vs	80%
Say who the product is for	95%	vs	80%
Say what the page covers	95%	vs	83%

35,136 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CITED

ADD SOURCES AND NUMBERS

...to every entry. Most-cited 5% vs least-cited 5%

Cite experts	78%	vs	64%
Use relevant statistics	83%	vs	72%

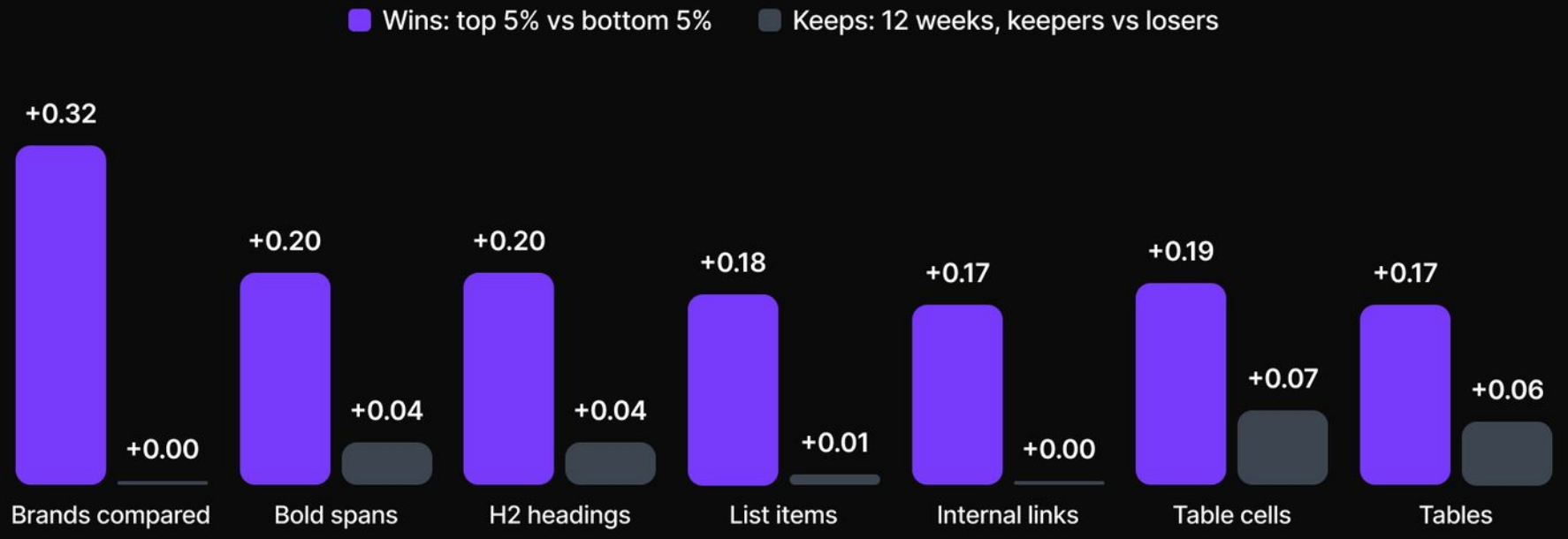
Key takeaways summary +0.18

Effect size

35,136 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

ONLY TABLES CITED WIN AND KEEP



35,288 pages + 53,918 pairs. Self-promo pages first cited Jan–14 Jul 2026. 12-week follow-up

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CITED

TABLES KEEP IT CITED

Keepers vs losers, 12 weeks after the first citation

Table cells (median)	27	vs	15
Words on the page	2,650	vs	2,500
Have a year in the URL	11%	vs	14%
“Top” in the title	23%	vs	27%

23,203 + 30,715 pairs. Self-promo pages first cited Jan–14 Jul 2026. 12-week follow-up

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

MORE OPTIONS. MORE STRUCTURE. ANSWER FIRST.

THAT'S WHAT GETS A LIST CITED.

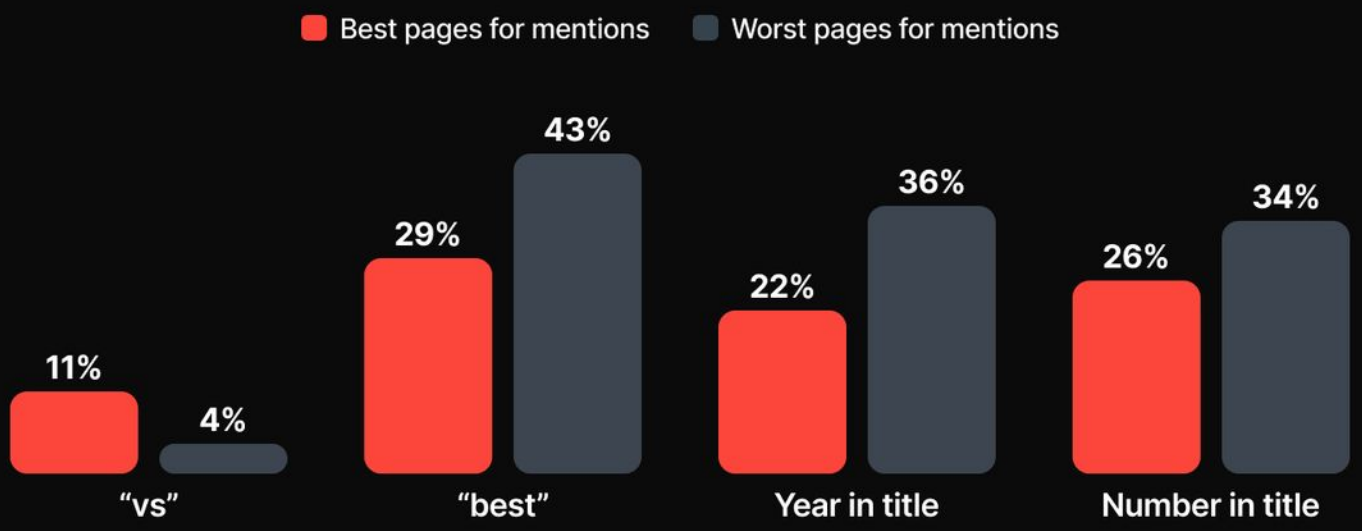
ACT IV

FACTORS TO GET YOUR BRAND NAMED

What the most-named pages have in common.

"VS" WINS NAMED THE MENTION

"Best" gets you cited instead



23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

LINKED, VISUAL, TIGHT PAGES NAMED

...get you named. Effect size, most-named 5% vs least-named 5%



23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

NAMED LINK TO YOUR PRODUCT

Most-named 5% vs least-named 5%

Internal links	11	vs	7
Links per 100 words	0.77	vs	0.50
Images (screenshots)	3	vs	1

23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

AVOID FLUFF

NAMED

Most-named 5% vs least-named 5%

Words on the page	2,350	vs	2,660
Words per paragraph	29.8	vs	33
Short paragraphs (under 20 words)	35%	vs	30%

23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

TITLE IT "X VS Y", KEEP PRICING OFF

NAMED

Most-named 5% vs least-named 5%

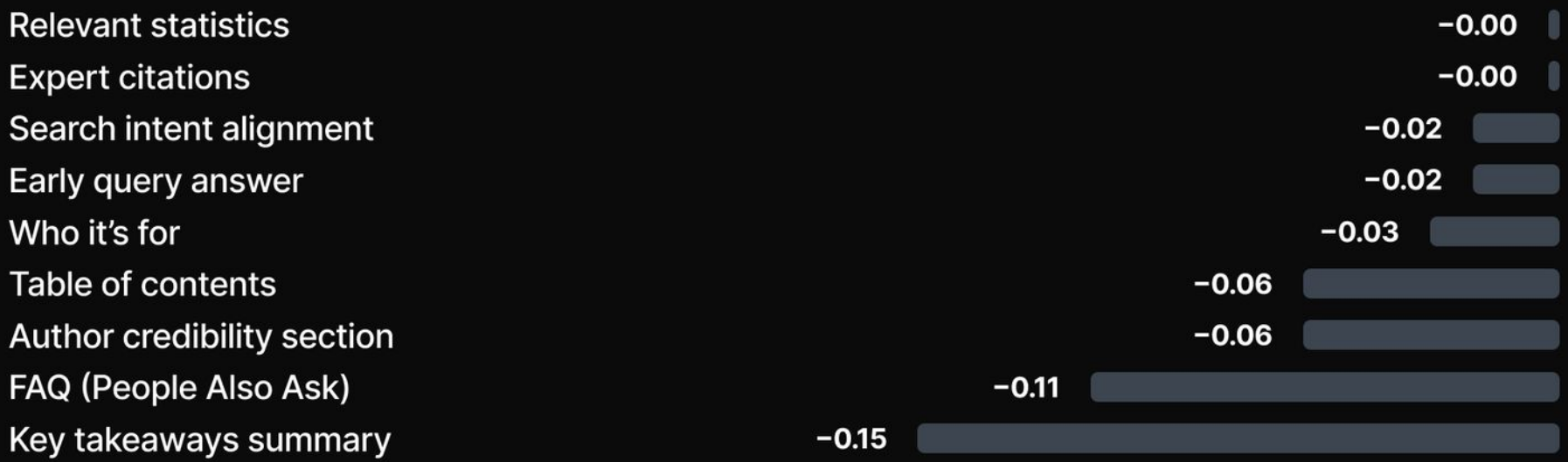
"Best" in title	29%	VS	43%
Year in title	22%	VS	36%
Prices mentioned	1	VS	4

23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

CHECKLISTS WON'T NAMED GET YOU NAMED

The GEO checklist, effect size on mentions



23,365 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

WRITE THE VERDICTS YOURSELF

NAMED

Most-named 5% vs least-named 5%

Words used only once	16.8%	VS	15.1%
Repeated 3-word phrases	11.7%	VS	13.2%

23,432 pages. 201,534 self-promo pages. 5,162 reports. Jul–Sep 2026. Within-report associations

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

NO YEAR, NO NAMED RANKING

Keepers vs losers: the name sticks 12 weeks later

Year in the title	41%	vs	51%
Explicit ranking	52%	vs	62%
"You" per 1,000 words	14.6	vs	13.4
Brands compared	6	vs	7

36,542 + 36,541 pairs. Self-promo pages first cited Jan–14 Jul 2026. 12-week follow-up

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

LIST YOURSELF AT #1

NAMED

CITED

Reach: Report prompts citing the page

Listed first



22.1%

Not listed first



20.0%

Publisher named

When listed first



38.4%

When not listed first



26.5%

663,838 page × report pairs. Jan–13 Oct 2026

Data From Surfer AI Tracker

TO GET NAMED, WRITE A TIGHTER PAGE THAT SOUNDS LIKE YOU AND LINKS TO YOU.

TWO PLAYBOOKS

PLAYBOOK 1

GET THE PAGE CITED

1. More brands on the list
2. Tables, bold, lists, H2s
3. Answer first, say who it's for
4. Sources and statistics
5. No CTAs

PLAYBOOK 2

GET YOUR BRAND NAMED

1. You at #1, shorter list
2. Internal links and screenshots
3. Shorter page and paragraphs
4. "vs", not "best 2026", no prices
5. Your own words, not a template

ONE PAGE CAN'T WIN BOTH. A SET CAN.

One page

HUB LIST FOR CITATIONS

1. “Best X tools”, 10+ options
2. A comparison table
3. Answer first, sources, no CTAs

Several pages

“X VS Y” FOR MENTIONS

1. Short, with you at #1
2. Linked to your product, with screenshots
3. Written by you, not a template

Our read, not a finding: a recommendation built on both studies


Does AI fall for your list?
A: No
B: Yes, if you target the right scoreboard


Does AI fall for your list?
A: No
B: Yes, if you target the right scoreboard

THANK *You*

Michał Suski

msu.ski | surfer.ai

Surfer



IT'S YOURS!

Scan for your free AI Visibility Report