

RESEARCH · WAVE 1

Where Patients Get Sent

How Google, Google's AI, and ChatGPT answer people looking for a therapist, and what the practice websites they reach tell them.

Credible by Design · Data captured October 8, 2026 · 1,750 answers in 50 US cities · 3,393 practice websites

What we found

1. **Psychology Today is on Google's first page almost every time.** It appeared in the top 10 for 267 of 300 searches and ranked first in 119. For "therapist near me," directories held 53% of the first page and practice websites 21%.
2. **Google's AI answers name practices, often beyond the map pack.** AI Mode named a practice or clinician in 265 of 300 answers. When an AI Overview named places, 40% of them were in the map pack on the same page.
3. **ChatGPT reads the directories and answers with people.** It searched the web every time and cited Psychology Today in 805 of 900 answers. Most of its first answers named individual clinicians, and 263 of 900 answers quoted a session fee.
4. **The answers change.** Only 29% of the businesses ChatGPT named appeared in all three runs of the same question. Google's AI Mode and ChatGPT named at least one of the same providers in 26% of comparisons.
5. **Practice websites leave basic questions open.** Of 3,393 sites, 45% state a session fee and 40% link to online booking. 80% say nothing about whether they are taking new clients.

1. Why we did this

People look for a therapist in several places now. Many start on Google, with its map of nearby practices. Some ask an AI assistant, which runs its own searches and answers with names.

Practice owners often ask us the same question: where do people find a therapist now, and what do they see when they look? Opinions on this are easy to find. We wanted a measured answer, gathered the way a person would search, across the whole country.

This is the first wave of a study we plan to repeat each quarter, with the same cities and the same questions. One wave is a snapshot. A series will show what changes.

2. What we did

- **Where.** The largest city in each of the 50 states, from New York City to Cheyenne, Wyoming.
- **What we asked.** Six questions a person looking for a therapist might ask. Each was typed the way people search Google, and asked the way people ask an assistant.
- **Where we asked.** Google search (with its AI Overview), Google Maps, Google’s AI Mode, and ChatGPT. ChatGPT answered each question three times.
- **When.** October 8, 2026, in one 17-minute window, from a US desktop location in each city, logged out.
- **What we recorded.** Who each answer showed, cited, and named: practices, clinicians, directories, platforms, and others. That is 1,750 answers in all.
- **The websites.** Every practice website a person would see in those answers, 3,665 in all, fetched the same day. 3,393 loaded, and we checked what each tells a prospective client.

The six questions

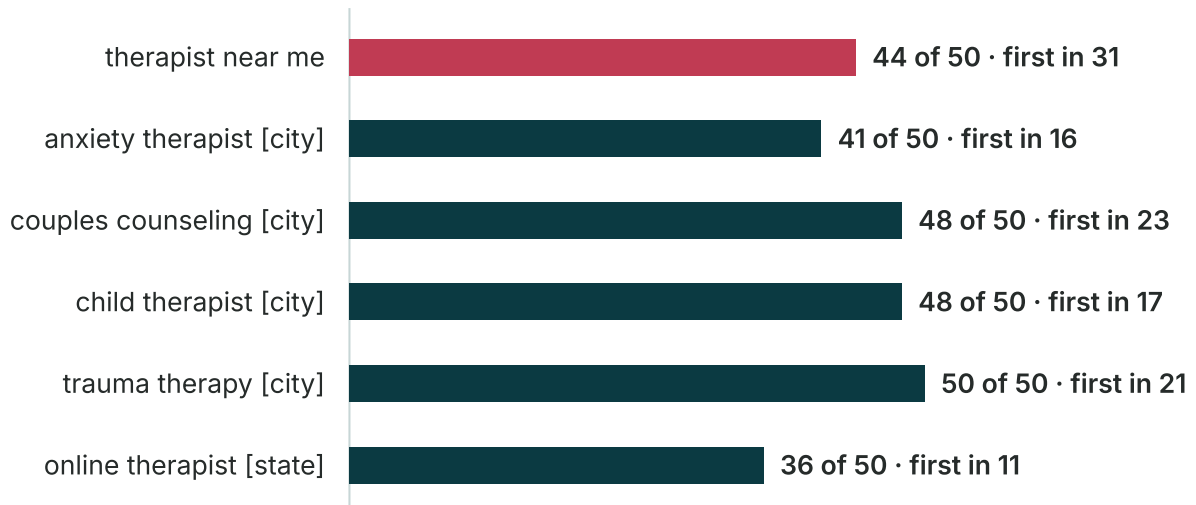
Need	Typed into Google	Asked of AI Mode and ChatGPT
General	"therapist near me"	"Can you recommend a therapist in [city], [ST]?"
Anxiety	"anxiety therapist [city] [ST]"	"Can you recommend a therapist in [city], [ST] who helps with anxiety?"
Couples	"couples counseling [city] [ST]"	"My partner and I are looking for couples counseling in [city], [ST]. Who would you recommend?"
Child	"child therapist [city] [ST]"	"Can you recommend a child therapist in [city], [ST]?"
Trauma	"trauma therapy [city] [ST]"	"Can you recommend a trauma therapist in [city], [ST]?"
Online	"online therapist [state]"	"Can you recommend a therapist in [state] who sees clients online?"

We name no practice or clinician in this report. Directories, platforms, and other companies are named where a number is about them. The full method is in Appendix A.

3. Google’s first page: directories hold much of it

Psychology Today appeared in Google’s top 10 for 267 of 300 searches. It ranked in the top three for 221 and first for 119. By itself it held 17% of every first-page result we recorded.

Figure 1. Psychology Today in Google's top 10, by question



Share of the 50 cities where Psychology Today appeared in the first 10 organic results. Labels give the count and how often it ranked first. Credible by Design, October 8, 2026.

Across all six questions, practice websites held 43% of first-page results and directories 35%. The broadest search was the hardest for practices. For "therapist near me," directories held 53% of the first page and practice websites 21%.

On searches that named a need, practice websites held more of the page. For anxiety, children, and trauma, practices held about half of first-page results (52%, 51%, and 52%). In 41 of 300 searches, no practice website reached the first page at all.

Table 1. Who holds Google's first page (2,678 organic results in 300 searches)

Site	Results	Share
Practice websites	1,147	43%
Directories	937	35%
of which Psychology Today	451	17%
Online-therapy and insurance-network platforms	207	8%
Multi-state group practice brands	146	5%
Social platforms	144	5%
Hospitals, universities, and government	36	1%
Speech, occupational, or physical therapy, and ABA	31	1%
Other and unclassified	30	1%

A map pack, the three nearby businesses Google shows above the results, appeared on 273 of 300 searches. It appeared on every general and couples search, and on 28 of 50 searches for an

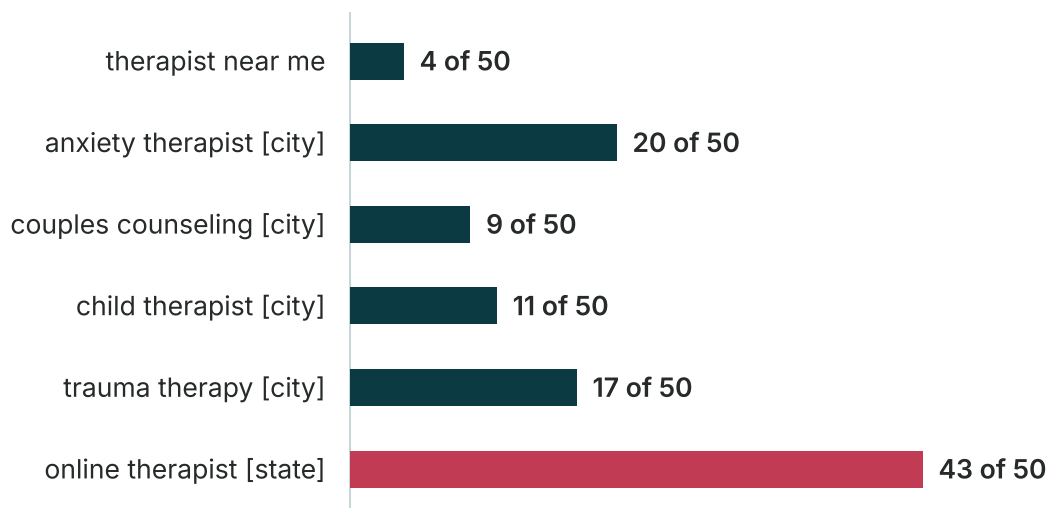
online therapist. For that online question, online-therapy and insurance-network platforms took 19% of the first page.

4. Google's AI answers name practices

AI Overviews

An AI Overview appeared on 104 of 300 searches. It was rare for "therapist near me" (4 of 50) and common for an online therapist in a state (43 of 50).

Figure 2. How often Google showed an AI Overview, by question



Share of the 50 searches for each question that showed an AI Overview. Credible by Design, October 8, 2026.

When one appeared, it usually named someone. 91 of the 104 AI Overviews named at least one practice or clinician, and 50 named a directory. Google's own place pages, the Business Profiles behind its map listings, made up 40% of the sources AI Overviews cited. Practice websites made up 30%, and directories 10%. Psychology Today was cited in 51 of 104 AI Overviews.

The places an AI Overview named often differed from the map pack beside it. 59 AI Overviews named places, about 4.0 each. Of those 235 places, 40% were in the map pack on the same page. The AI Overview named 56% of the map pack's places. Only 18 of 55 named the map pack's places and no others.

AI Mode

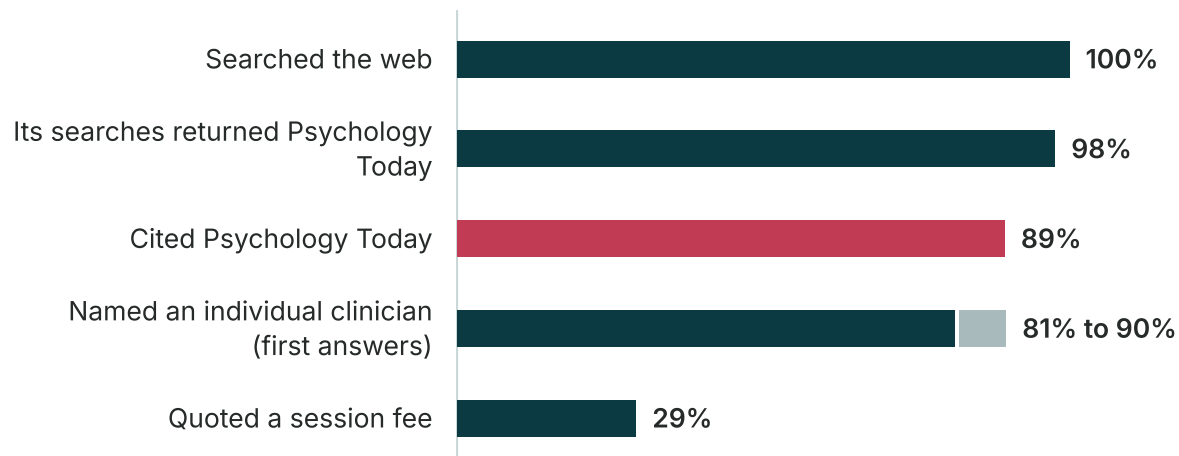
Google's AI Mode answered all 300 questions. 265 answers named at least one practice or clinician, about 2.7 per answer. 18% of the providers it named were individual clinicians. It named Psychology Today in 195 of 300 answers, and in 45 of 50 answers to the online question.

164 AI Mode answers showed Google place cards, with a photo, rating, and address. Of 519 cards, 14% were in the map pack for the same search on Google. 36% were in the first 20 Google Maps

results for the same search, and 53% appeared in any of the city's five Maps searches. AI Mode often recommended practices further down Google Maps, or outside the Maps results we recorded.

5. ChatGPT reads the directories and answers with people

Figure 3. From a search to a short list of people



Share of ChatGPT answers. The clinician bar runs from a strict pattern (a name followed by a license or degree) to the reader's count, first answers only. Credible by Design, October 8, 2026.

ChatGPT searched the web in every one of its 900 answers, running 1.1 searches per answer on average. Its searches returned Psychology Today in 879 of 900 answers, and it cited Psychology Today in 805. Directories made up 65% of the pages it cited, and practice websites 26%.

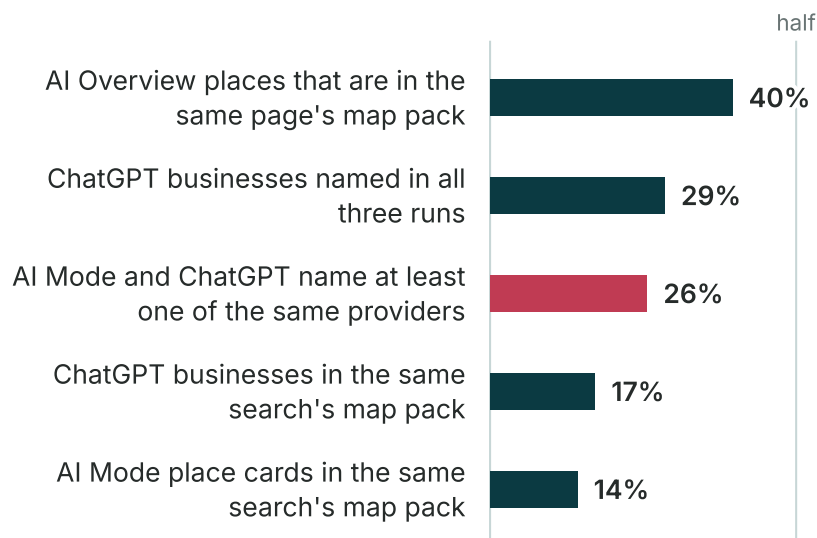
It answered with names. Every first answer named at least one practice or clinician, about 6.3 per answer. Individual clinicians, named as people, were 40% of the providers it named. Measured strictly, by a name followed by a license or degree, 81% of first answers named a clinician. Our reader, which also counts names written without a credential, found 90%.

ChatGPT rarely sent people to the directory itself. Psychology Today was named in the text of 29 of 300 first answers, while its pages sat behind the names in most of them.

It also quoted prices. 263 of 900 answers quoted a session fee. In 229 of 263 of them, a link to Psychology Today followed the fee, which is where a clinician lists a rate.

6. Ask twice, get a different list

Figure 4. How often the answers agree



Each bar is a share of the items named in it. Place and business matches use normalized names (Appendix A.6).
Credible by Design, October 8, 2026.

ChatGPT answered each question three times. Between any two runs, the businesses it named overlapped by 46% on average. Of 2,002 businesses named across the three runs, 571 (29%) appeared in all three.

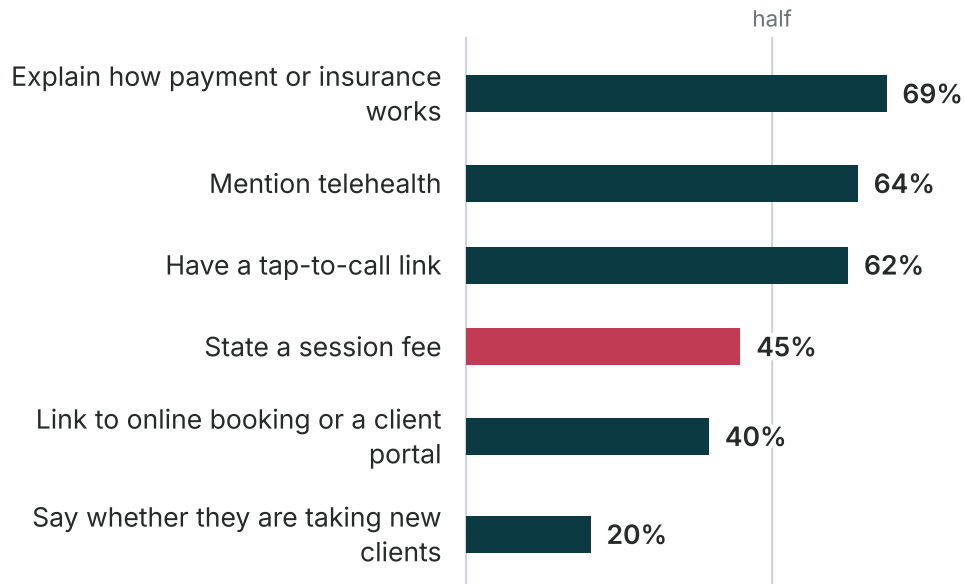
ChatGPT's picks also differed from Google's. Of the 3,751 businesses it named, 17% were in the map pack for the same search, and 32% were in that search's first 20 Google Maps results.

Google's AI Mode and ChatGPT agreed least. In 273 city and question pairs where both named providers, they named at least one of the same in 70 (26%). On average, the two lists overlapped by 4%.

7. What practice websites tell a prospective client

We fetched every practice website a person would see in these answers: in a map pack, in the first 20 Google Maps results, in the first 10 organic results, or cited or named by an AI answer. Of 3,665 sites, 3,393 loaded. The rest blocked automated visits, failed to load, or asked crawlers to stay away.

Figure 5. What the websites say



Share of 3,393 practice websites, read from the home page and up to four pages about fees, booking, contact, or questions. Credible by Design, October 8, 2026.

Most sites explain how payment works (69%) and mention telehealth (64%). Fewer than half state what a session costs (45%), and 40% link to online booking or a client portal. Only 20% say whether they are taking new clients.

Table 2. What practice websites show (3,393 sites)

The site	Sites	Share
States a session fee	1,518	45%
Has a page about fees or rates	1,390	41%
Explains how payment or insurance works	2,328	69%
Names an insurer	1,497	44%
Mentions telehealth	2,169	64%
Links to online booking or a client portal	1,344	40%
Has a tap-to-call link	2,115	62%
Has an email link	2,025	60%
Has a contact form	1,704	50%
Says it is taking new clients	389	11%
Says it has a waitlist or is not taking new clients	299	9%
Says nothing about availability	2,705	80%

The site	Sites	Share
Links to its own Psychology Today profile	206	6%

The technical basics are close to universal. Nearly every site has a page title (99.7%), 99% are set up for phones, and 98% load securely. 51% carry structured data that tells search engines they are a business.

SimplePractice's client portal was the most common booking link, on 19% of sites. TherapyNotes followed at 6%, and Calendly at 3%.

Table 3. What the sites are built on (3,393 sites)

Platform	Sites	Share
WordPress	1,111	33%
Squarespace	901	27%
Wix	508	15%
GoDaddy	120	4%
Brighter Vision	90	3%
SimplePractice	75	2%
Weebly	63	2%
Webflow	57	2%
Duda	51	2%
Other platforms	138	4%
Unidentified or custom	279	8%

By how a site was seen

Sites in a map pack, or named by an AI answer, were somewhat more likely to state a fee and to link to booking. The table describes what we saw. It does not show that one causes the other.

Table 4. By how a site was seen

	In a map pack (459)	Named by an AI answer, not in a pack (1,127)	Neither (1,807)
States a session fee	53%	47%	41%
Links to online booking	45%	43%	36%
Explains payment	73%	71%	66%
Mentions telehealth	65%	67%	62%

8. What this means for a practice

1. **Directory profiles feed the answers.** ChatGPT read Psychology Today in nearly every answer and repeated what profiles say, fees included. A profile kept current, and consistent with the website, is part of how a practice is described.
2. **The Business Profile feeds Google's AI.** Google's own place pages were the largest share of what AI Overviews cited. Accurate categories, hours, and services give that summary something true to say.
3. **Answer the questions people ask first.** What does a session cost? How does payment work? Is the practice taking new clients? How do I book? Fewer than half of the sites answer the first, and few answer the third.
4. **Use the words people search with.** On searches that named a need, such as anxiety, children, or trauma, practice websites held more of Google's first page. Name the needs you treat, your city, and online care if you offer it.
5. **Read any single test with care.** AI answers change from run to run and differ between assistants. One search tells a practice little. A pattern over time tells it more.

Nothing here guarantees that a change gets a practice shown or recommended. It shows what these systems read, and what a person finds when they arrive.

9. Limits

- **One moment.** Results come from one day, one desktop location per city, and logged-out sessions. They shift from week to week.
- **Large cities.** We searched the largest city in each state. Rural searchers may see different results.
- **Six questions.** People ask in many more ways.
- **One map view.** Google Maps was read from each city center at one zoom level. A different neighborhood can show different practices.
- **A logged-out ChatGPT.** The app people use may remember them and answer differently.
- **Reading and checking.** Names were read from answers by an AI reader checked against hand counts. Website checks are text patterns checked against an independent reader. About 2% of sites may be misclassified.
- **Patterns.** We report what we observed. Where two things appear together, we make no claim that one causes the other.

10. What comes next

We plan to run the same questions in the same cities each quarter, starting in January 2027, and to publish what changes.

Appendix A. Method

A.1 Cities

The most populous city in each of the 50 states, by the population figure in the simplemaps US cities dataset. That figure covers each city's urban area, which is why Delaware's city is Dover and New Hampshire's is Nashua. Each city matched a location in Google's location list exactly.

- Alabama: Birmingham
- Alaska: Anchorage
- Arizona: Phoenix
- Arkansas: Little Rock
- California: Los Angeles
- Colorado: Denver
- Connecticut: Hartford
- Delaware: Dover
- Florida: Miami
- Georgia: Atlanta
- Hawaii: Honolulu
- Idaho: Boise
- Illinois: Chicago
- Indiana: Indianapolis
- Iowa: Des Moines
- Kansas: Wichita
- Kentucky: Louisville
- Louisiana: New Orleans
- Maine: Portland
- Maryland: Baltimore
- Massachusetts: Boston
- Michigan: Detroit
- Minnesota: Minneapolis
- Mississippi: Jackson
- Missouri: St. Louis
- Montana: Billings
- Nebraska: Omaha
- Nevada: Las Vegas
- New Hampshire: Nashua
- New Jersey: Trenton
- New Mexico: Albuquerque
- New York: New York
- North Carolina: Charlotte
- North Dakota: Fargo
- Ohio: Cincinnati
- Oklahoma: Oklahoma City
- Oregon: Portland
- Pennsylvania: Philadelphia
- Rhode Island: Providence
- South Carolina: Charleston
- South Dakota: Sioux Falls
- Tennessee: Nashville
- Texas: Houston
- Utah: Salt Lake City
- Vermont: Burlington
- Virginia: Virginia Beach
- Washington: Seattle
- West Virginia: Huntington
- Wisconsin: Milwaukee
- Wyoming: Cheyenne

A.2 Questions

Six questions, each in three forms: typed into Google, typed into Google Maps, and asked of AI Mode and ChatGPT (table in Section 2). The anxiety question repeats the wording of our earlier test of what ChatGPT searches. The others follow the words that people used in Search Console queries for five practices we work with, counted as patterns only.

A.3 Capture

All answers were collected through DataForSEO on October 8, 2026, between 14:49 and 15:06 UTC, in English, on desktop. Google search used Google's location for each city, the first 10 results, and the AI Overview. Google Maps used the city center at zoom 13 and recorded 20 listings. Anchorage returned no Maps results at its coordinate, so its Maps searches used Google's place name. AI Mode used Google's location for each city. ChatGPT used a US location, with the city written in the question, and decided for itself whether to search. All 1,750 jobs returned an answer.

A.4 Classifying sites

Each site that appeared was given one class: a practice's own website (including clinics and community agencies), a booking page, a directory, a platform (online therapy or insurance networks), a chain (multi-state group brands), an institution (hospitals, universities, government, licensing boards), an association, Google, social, media, an insurer, look-alike care (speech, occupational, or physical therapy, and ABA), or other. A hand-kept list classed the third parties. A site linked from a Google Maps therapy listing, or named as a business by ChatGPT, counted as a practice. Name rules decided the rest. In a hand check of 60 sites classed by name rules, 54 were right, so about 2% of practice sites may be misclassified.

A.5 Who an answer names

Google's place cards are structured, and we read them directly. Names in running text need a reader, so an AI reader listed every named organization or person in 704 answers. It covered every AI Overview, every AI Mode answer, and ChatGPT's first run of each question. It recorded 4,305 names, each with a type. In our pilot, its counts matched our own hand counts in all 18 AI Mode answers we checked. ChatGPT's second and third runs were compared through the business list ChatGPT returns with each answer.

A.6 Matching places and businesses

Two names count as the same place when they match after removing case, punctuation, and legal suffixes, or when one begins with the other. A place also matches when its rating and review count are equal and the names share a distinctive word. Rating and review count alone never decide a match, since a rating such as 5.0 from 3 reviews is common. On 10 AI Overview pages checked by hand, the rule matched our reading on every page, counting one borderline place as different.

A.7 Website checks

Each check is a text pattern applied to the home page and up to four pages about fees, booking, contact, or questions. A fee is a dollar amount from \$40 to \$600 near a word about sessions, with no sign that the price is for something else, such as a cancellation, a letter, or a training. Booking is a link to one of about 35 scheduling or client-portal services. An independent reader answered the same questions from the same saved pages without seeing the patterns' answers.

Website checks against an independent reader

Check	First sample, first version	Fresh sample, version used
States a session fee	43 of 50	28 of 29
Explains payment	47 of 50	27 of 29
Names an insurer	49 of 50	28 of 29
Links to online booking	45 of 50	29 of 29
Mentions telehealth	47 of 50	27 of 29

The first sample showed the fee pattern counting prices for things other than sessions, and the booking list counting payment links. Both were tightened the same day. The second sample, 30 sites the patterns had not been tuned on, measures the version used in this report. One of its sites turned out to be a directory and left the frame, so 29 are compared.

A.8 A second count

Separate code recounted 18 headline measures straight from the raw answers and the reader's files. All 18 matched.

A.9 What we publish

This report gives totals only. Raw answers, which name practices and clinicians, stay with us. Questions about the method are welcome.

About Credible by Design

Credible by Design builds websites, copy, and search visibility for therapy and private healthcare practices. Learn more at crediblebydesign.com.

How to cite: Credible by Design. Where Patients Get Sent, Wave 1. Data captured October 8, 2026. crediblebydesign.com.