

From Educational Questions to Brand Selection

Three small experiments on Commercial Emergence in ChatGPT Search

CENTRAL OBSERVATION AI systems can introduce commercial solution categories before users ask for providers. As decision specificity increases, responses can move from category relevance through a Candidate Set to justified Brand Selection.

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Final publication based on 46 documented responses in a narrowly defined ChatGPT Search context.

Executive Summary

This Research Note summarizes three connected, small observational experiments examining when ChatGPT Search introduces commercial solution categories, concrete intermediary companies and eventually provider recommendations during an educational journey about becoming self-employed.

RESULT IN ONE SENTENCE Operational problem questions were usually sufficient for a category recommendation; questions about provider types produced concrete companies, and Candidate-Set questions already produced justified recommendations.

What We Observed

- Experiment 001: Commercial categories appeared in all 24 responses; during operational Turns 4–6, a target-adjacent infrastructure class was recommended in 12 of 12 responses.
- Experiment 002: The same operational questions produced at least a clear category recommendation in 11 of 12 standalone runs. Accumulated conversation context was therefore not a necessary condition for Commercial Emergence in these prompts.
- Experiment 003: The escalation replicated identically in both runs: S0/S1 = category recommendation, S2 = concrete companies / Candidate Set, S3/S4 = justified Brand Selection.
- Concrete target companies appeared in 6 of 10 Experiment 003 responses; Candidate Sets also appeared in 6 of 10; justified selection appeared in 4 of 10.
- No stable winner emerged. Fonds Finanz appeared in all four P6 responses, while the final favorite differed between the two replications.

Working Model



The results are best treated as a directed observation, not as a universal ranking factor, causal proof or general theory of AI Search.

1. Starting Point and Terminology

Many AI Visibility analyses begin with Mentions, Citations or explicit recommendation prompts. For companies, an earlier transition may matter: the point at which an AI system recognizes that a commercial solution category could help solve an educational or operational problem.

Concept	Object of Analysis	Research Question
Educational Journey	Development of the information need	Which questions emerge as a user increasingly understands the topic?
Query Expansion	Expansion of a concrete request	Which additional aspects or entities does the system derive from the prompt?
Fan-Out Queries	Actual generated search queries	Which queries are sent to search or retrieval?

Commercial Emergence	Introduction of commercial solutions	When do provider classes or companies become relevant without having been named first?
Candidate Set	Set of considered companies	Which concrete brands are offered as a comparison or selection set?
Brand Selection	Prioritization of a concrete brand	When and why is one provider selected?

Research Logic

The experiments followed a simple sequence: SMALL EXPERIMENT → OBSERVATION → NOTE → NEXT QUESTION. Each stage answered one narrow question and created the starting point for the next experiment.

Experiment	Core Question	Contribution
001	When do commercial solutions appear in an educational conversation?	Locating Commercial Emergence.
002	Does it emerge from the question or from accumulated context?	Journey-versus-standalone control.
003	When do categories become concrete companies and recommendations?	Commercial Escalation Ladder.

2. Method and Research Scope

The study was conducted on 3 September 2026 in German using ChatGPT Search in a logged-out incognito context. For the technically verified initial run, unauth-mweb, free-unauth and web_mobile_unauth were recorded. For later runs, the visible responses were fully documented, but model and Fan-Out data could not be reliably verified separately for every run.

SHARED PERSONA Several years of experience in financial distribution at a German bank; planning to become self-employed as an independent intermediary for financial investments and insurance.

Experiment	Structure	Responses	Comparison
001	Four conversations × six sequential prompts	24	Journey stages and replication
002	Three operational questions × four new chats	12	Journey vs. standalone
003	Five escalation stages × two new chats	10	Category → Candidate Set → Selection
Total	Three connected experiments	46	Descriptive qualitative coding

Coding

Responses were coded using a proximity scale: P0 no Commercial Emergence; P1 peripheral; P2 target-adjacent category mentioned; P3 functionally explained; P4 category recommended; P5 concrete target company mentioned; P6 concrete company recommended or prioritized. Candidate Set, Brand Selection and Selection Rationale were also recorded.

Analysis Principle

OBSERVATION Only visible response content and documented frequencies.

INFERENCE A plausible interpretation consistent with the observations but not causally established.

HYPOTHESIS An open proposition requiring a subsequent experiment.

3. Experiment 001 — Commercial Emergence in the Journey

RESEARCH QUESTION When and in which questions do commercial solution categories or providers emerge during an educational conversation, even though the user did not initially ask for them?

Observation

- Commercial solution categories appeared in 24 of 24 responses.
- Target-adjacent intermediary and partner models appeared before the strongly operational questions, with varying proximity from P1 to P4.
- During Turns 4–6, infrastructure and cooperation partners were recommended in all four conversations: 12 of 12 responses reached at least P4.
- Only one response reached P5 and named Fonds Finanz, Jung, DMS & Cie., BCA and blau direkt as market examples.
- No response reached Brand Selection.

Journey Stage	Replicated Pattern	Maximum Proximity
1–3: Orientation and requirements	Commercial infrastructure and partner models appear; strength varies.	P1–P4
4: Setup phase	Infrastructure partners are consistently recommended as an early decision.	P4
5: Operational implementation	Intermediary platforms become an operational backbone.	P4; once P5
6: Infrastructure decision	A lean partner architecture is consistently recommended.	P4

Interpretation

The educational journey created commercial relevance early. The most stable Commercial Emergence appeared where the user moved from understanding the profession toward solving organizational and operational problems.

Open question after Experiment 001: Was this transition caused by the new question, accumulated conversation context or the system's previous answers?

4. Experiment 002 — Journey vs. Standalone

RESEARCH QUESTION Do the same operational questions produce Commercial Emergence without the preceding conversation?

Observation

Metric	Journey	Standalone
P4 or higher	12/12	11/12
P5 or higher	1/12	0/12
Concrete target brand	1/12	0/12
Brand Selection	0/12	0/12

- All twelve standalone responses contained commercial solution categories.
- Eleven of twelve standalone runs reached P4; only one remained at P2.
- For operational implementation and infrastructure decision, every standalone run reached P4.
- No standalone run named a concrete target intermediary company.

Inference

PERMISSIBLE INFERENCE For these operational prompts, accumulated conversation context was not a necessary condition for recommending a commercial solution category.

Experiment 002 does not fully isolate the influence of the system's generated response structure. It does show that the concrete operational question alone was sufficient to reproduce almost the same P4 pattern.

Business Relevance

The commercial transition was therefore not exclusively a long-conversation effect. Individual problem-oriented prompts can already create a Discovery Moment. For companies, concrete operational questions at the edge of their category become strategically relevant.

5. Experiment 003 – Commercial Escalation Ladder

RESEARCH QUESTION How does the mention and selection of concrete intermediary companies change as the user's question moves step by step from an operational information need toward a provider decision?

Stage	Prompt Function	Replication Pattern	Outcome
S0	Operational baseline	P4 / P4	Category recommendation
S1	Selection criteria	P4 / P4	Criteria, no target brand
S2	Provider types	P5 / P5	Concrete Candidate Set
S3	Which companies should I compare?	P6 / P6	Candidate Set + justified selection
S4	Which companies fit?	P6 / P6	Three recommendations + favorite

Observation

- The escalation sequence was identical in both replications.
- Concrete target companies and Candidate Sets appeared in 6 of 10 responses.
- Brand Selection and a concrete Selection Rationale appeared in 4 of 10 responses.
- Already at S2, the question about types of companies produced concrete brand examples.
- Already at S3, the Candidate-Set question produced prioritization and Selection Rationale; the explicit S4 fit question was not required for selection to begin.

Observed Companies

Company	Runs with Mention	Observed Selection Pattern
Fonds Finanz	5	Present in all four P6 responses; never the sole favorite.
BCA	5	Broadly replicated; favorite in one final-fit run.
blau direkt	5	Broadly replicated; frequently positioned as a technology option.
Jung, DMS & Cie. / JDC	4	All-round / liability umbrella option.
Netfonds / NFS	4	Investment-oriented option; favorite in one final-fit run.

6. Synthesis – From Problem to Selection

Together, the three experiments describe an observed transition logic. It is not a universal journey, but within this narrow setting it was notably consistent.

User Task	Observed System Response	Business Interpretation
Orientation	Commercial categories appear at the edges.	Connect problems and use cases with the category.
Operational implementation	Provider class becomes a recommended solution.	Build Category Association and functional explanation.
Selection criteria	Evaluation logic becomes explicit.	Provide verifiable Selection Evidence.
Provider types	Concrete companies form a Candidate Set.	Ensure clear entity, role and market differentiation.
Comparison / selection	Companies are prioritized with rationale.	Provide differentiated evidence for specific target groups and use cases.

Observation

Commercial Emergence occurred before the explicit provider question. The move to concrete companies occurred when the question addressed provider classes or candidates. Brand Selection appeared when comparison or fit logic became explicit.

Inference

AI Visibility can usefully be separated into Category Visibility, Candidate-Set Visibility and Selection Visibility. A brand can be strong at one layer and absent at the next. Content that merely explains what a company offers is therefore not automatically Selection Evidence.

Hypothesis

Companies may increase Candidate-Set and Selection relevance when first-party and external sources consistently establish which users, problems and selection criteria the brand is particularly suited for. Experiments 001–003 did not causally test this hypothesis.

Working Model



7. Practical Implications for Companies

The results do not provide an optimization formula. They provide a more precise working model for analyzing and designing AI Search journeys.

1. Commercial Transition Mapping

Do not map only conventional keywords or explicit provider questions. Map the educational and operational questions at which an AI system first introduces the relevant solution category. This can make the top of funnel more precise.

2. Journey Coverage

Content should support the sequence Problem Understanding → Operational Implementation → Selection Criteria → Provider Classes → Comparison. This does not imply one page per prompt; it implies a coherent information architecture across the decision logic.

3. Category Association

A brand needs to be understandable in relation to the problems and situations in which its provider class becomes relevant. Clear statements about role, target audience, scope and functional utility matter.

4. Selection Evidence

Companies can translate recurring AI selection criteria into verifiable evidence. In this market, observed criteria included product access, regulatory model, technology, support, integrations, costs, portfolio rights, specialization and concrete operating scenarios.

5. Separate Measurement

Measure Category Inclusion, Candidate-Set Inclusion, Selection and Selection Rationale separately. A company can be visible at one layer and absent at the next.

Measurement Point	Question
Category Inclusion	Is our provider category introduced as a solution?
Candidate-Set Inclusion	Are we named as a concrete candidate?
Selection	Are we prioritized or recommended?
Selection Rationale	Which characteristics justify inclusion or exclusion?

NOT ESTABLISHED The experiments do not prove that particular content causes Brand Selection. They identify question types at which companies can measure outcomes and later test controlled interventions.

8. Limitations

- One market: independent financial and insurance intermediation in Germany.
- One product and access context: ChatGPT Search in a logged-out incognito mode.
- One collection date: 3 September 2026.
- Small, non-representative sample of 46 responses.
- No robust, continuous capture of Fan-Out Queries or retrieval paths.
- Qualitative coding by one researcher; no independent intercoder validation.
- Experiment 003 deliberately contains increasingly explicit provider questions. It measures response structure and escalation, not the natural probability of Brand Selection without provider-oriented prompting.
- Brand mentions and recommendations may be influenced by current search results, product changes or model routing.

What Should Not Be Generalized

The results do not imply that every educational journey becomes commercial, that S2 always produces brands or that particular intermediary companies are permanently preferred. All claims should remain bounded by the persona, prompt set, language, product context, collection date and documented responses.

9. Next Research Questions

- Which selection criteria repeat across more runs, models and collection dates?
- Which sources support Candidate-Set and Brand-Selection statements?
- How stable is Candidate-Set composition under identical prompts?
- What role do concrete target-group or business-model characteristics play in selection?
- Can a controlled change to a first-party page alter Candidate-Set or Selection signals?
- Do informational, commercial and decision prompts show similar transitions in other markets?

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEP Before a content intervention, identify the recurring Selection Criteria and the sources used to support them in a small Experiment 004.

10. Closing Perspective

These three experiments do not provide a universal theory of AI Search. They show a narrower but practically useful pattern.

Commercial solution categories can emerge while a user is still asking educational or operational questions. Operational questions can reproduce this transition without accumulated conversation context. And as decision specificity increases, responses can move from category relevance through a Candidate Set to justified Brand Selection.

For companies, this expands the useful scope of AI Visibility analysis. Relevant visibility does not begin only when users name a provider or ask for the “best” company. It can begin earlier — with the problems, tasks and decision criteria from which an AI system constructs commercial relevance.

Working Model



The practical implication is not that companies should optimize for a fixed sequence of prompts. Each transition represents a different visibility problem.

A company may be strongly associated with a category but absent from the Candidate Set. It may enter the Candidate Set but lack the evidence required for selection. And it may be selected under one set of criteria while losing under another.

Understanding those transitions requires measuring them separately. The next research step is therefore not to generate more prompt variations. It is to investigate the Selection Criteria and sources behind the observed recommendations.

Only after those mechanisms are better understood does a controlled content intervention become a useful experiment.

AI Visibility is not one state.

It is a sequence of increasingly consequential forms of consideration and selection.

Documentation Basis

- AI Search Experiment 001 — capture sheet and evaluation, version 1.6.
- AI Search Experiment 002 — twelve standalone runs and journey-versus-standalone comparison.
- AI Search Experiment 003 — ten runs, coded results and Commercial Escalation Ladder.

AI Search Lab · Research Note 001. No external peer review. Research conducted 3 September 2026. Final publication version.