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DO EXACT MATCH DOMAINS STILL WORK?

EMDs in Google and in AI answers. What 2026 data says about buying a keyword domain.

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An exact match domain bought today won't rank you by itself. It only helps when an AI picks between sources it already found.

+0.9

Google: about one position, at best
For weaker sites (DR 0–20) vs a brand domain with the same links. For domains under 5 years old it could be zero.

4.7%

New EMDs reach the top 10 no more often
Other new domains from the same niches: 5.7%.

59%

LLMs pick the EMD when sources are equal
Chance would be 20%. A keyword in the URL path gets 48%.

28–102

Real AI answers: no extra love
With Google's top 10 as 100, EMDs' share of AI-cited sources is 28 (GPT) to 102 (AI Overviews).

Buy an EMD if it's a good name for your business. Don't buy it as an SEO strategy.

What I measured

7,374
commercial keywords in the US and UK, 10 industries, picked regardless of whether an EMD ranks

106,130
Google results (top 20), with AI Overviews and map packs

6,267
extra local keywords in 40 cities, from Houston to Swansea, where EMDs actually live

3,048
new domains from 2024–25, found in certificate logs and tracked until October 2026

~60,000
answers from GPT-4.1 mini, Gemini Flash and Claude Haiku

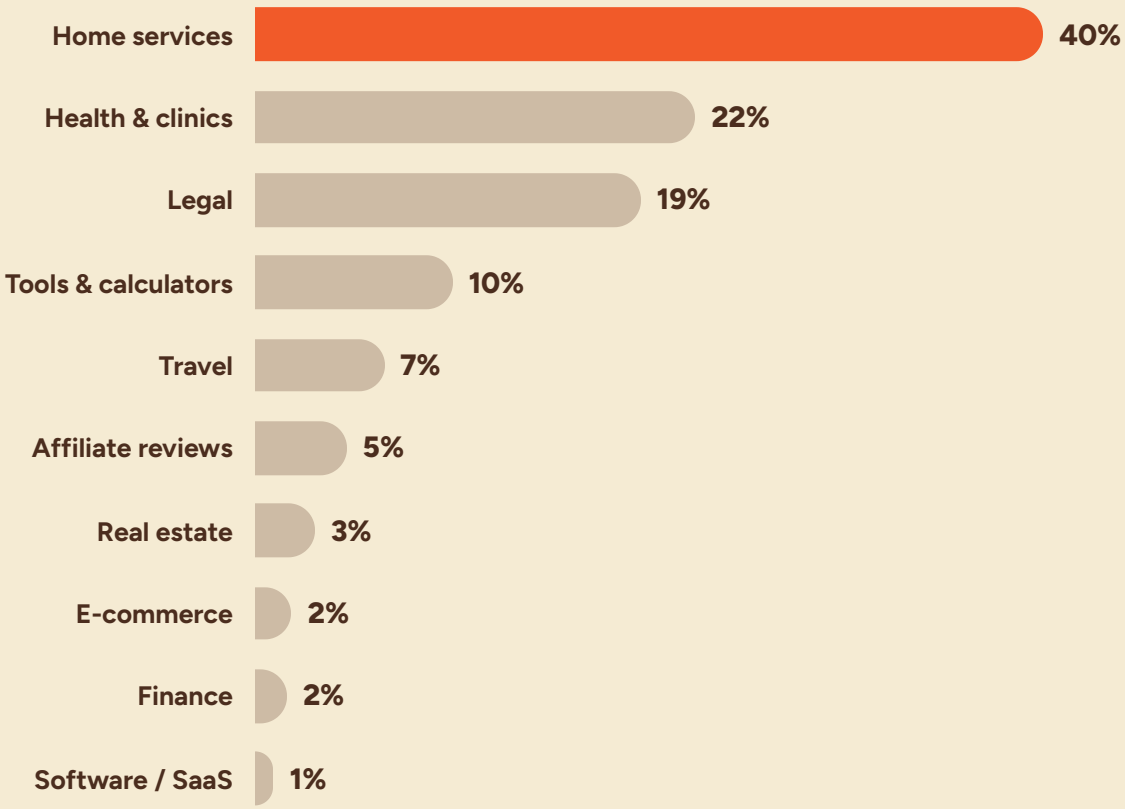
$224
total API cost (cap was $750)

Every ranking comparison is made on the same SERP: a plumber in Tulsa is compared with other plumbers in Tulsa, not with Wikipedia. Brands with keyword-like names (hotels.com) and platforms (Yelp, Reddit) are kept separate.

Sources: DataForSEO (SERPs, AI Overviews, keyword data), Ahrefs (DR, referring domains, traffic, ranking keywords), Certificate Transparency logs (crt.sh), RDAP registration dates, OpenAI, Google and Anthropic APIs.

Home services is the only niche where EMDs are common

Share of SERPs with at least one exact or all-words EMD in the top 20



Overall, 11.9% of US and 8.9% of UK SERPs have one. Nobody is ranking crmsoftware.com in 2026.

> **If you're not a local service business, this whole question barely applies to you.**

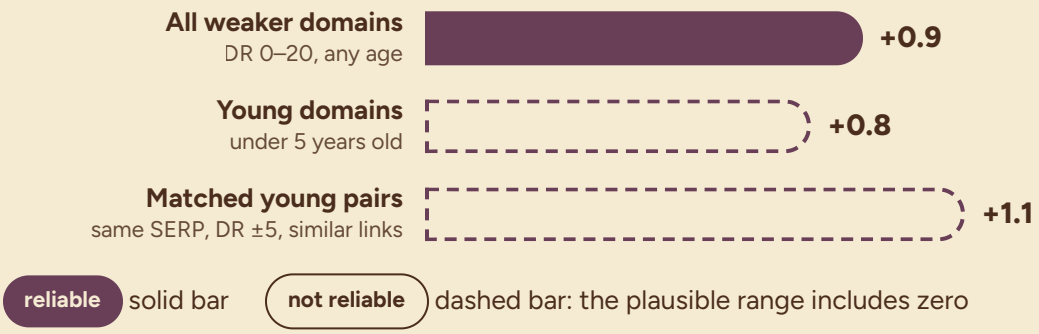
US and UK combined, 7,374 SERPs. Exact = the domain is the keyword (hyphens, plural and word order allowed). All words = every keyword word plus something else (besthotelrentals.com). Per-market table in the appendix.

Google gives an EMD about one position. For young domains, maybe nothing.

+0.9

positions vs a brand domain with similar DR and links, on the same SERP

Positions gained by an EMD (right = ranks higher)



reliable solid bar **not reliable** dashed bar: the plausible range includes zero

Chance of being in the top 3: +10 percentage points for all weaker domains, +8 for young ones (not reliable). This is the best case for the name: I only measure sites already in the top 20, and other on-page work (how well the site is optimised) isn't measured. Controlling for the keyword in the title doesn't change the result.

> **An EMD might nudge you up a spot. It won't carry a site that has no links.**

SERP fixed-effects model on common support (DR ≤ 20), controls: DR bins, referring-domain deciles, domain age; SE clustered by SERP. 11,349 SERPs (main + local extension sample). 95% CIs: all weaker +0.1 to +1.6 (n=364); young -0.7 to +2.2 (n=119); young pairs -0.4 to +2.6 (128 pairs).

Ranking EMDs usually have fewer links than their competitors

78% of EMDs in the top 20 have fewer referring domains than the typical competitor on the same SERP



The median EMD has **0.66×** the referring domains of its competitors. This is where the "EMDs still work" feeling comes from: they do rank with weaker link profiles. The model on the previous page shows how much of that is the name: about one position.

When an EMD makes the top 20, it's in the top 3 a bit more often



n = 1,338 EMDs (main sample); competitors exclude platforms. Ahrefs dofollow referring domains. Top-3 shares: 166 exact-match and 59,401 brand results in the top 20.

New EMDs don't reach the top 10 more often than other new domains

4.7% of new EMDs rank in the top 10 for anything, vs 5.7% of other new domains from the same niches



And for their own keyword? Barely.

2.5%
rank top 10 for their own keyword

0.7%
if that keyword has 100+ searches a month

~94%
of all new domains rank for nothing, EMD or not

Most own-keyword "wins" are names like mywaterdamagehero.com ranking for "my water damage hero": ranking for your own brand name.

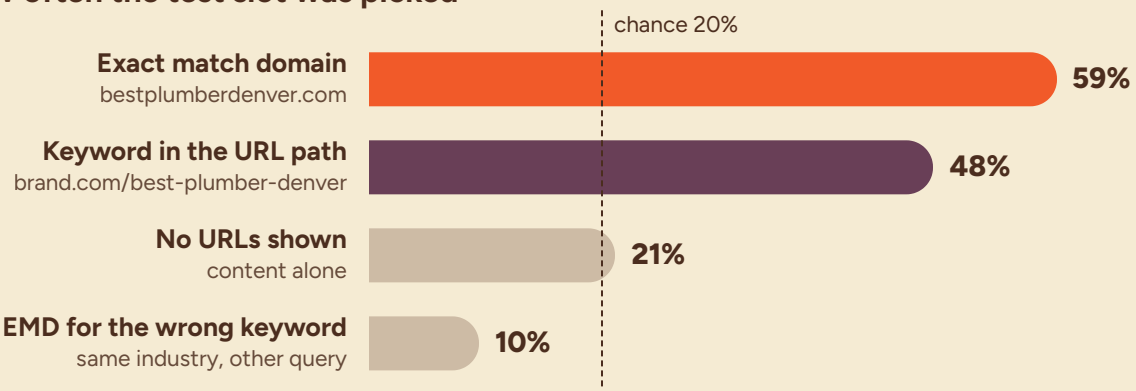
> **The bottleneck is building a real site and earning links, not the name.**

3,048 domains with a first HTTPS certificate between May 2024 and June 2025, found by prefix queries for 36 niche terms; 1,333 still have a valid certificate. EMD = the name read as a query has 10+ searches. Ahrefs, October 2026. Difference in top-10 share -1.0 pp (95% CI -3.5 to +1.4).

LLMs pick the EMD 3× more often than chance, because the URL matches the question

59% of the time a model picked the EMD from five equally good texts. Chance: 20%.

How often the test slot was picked



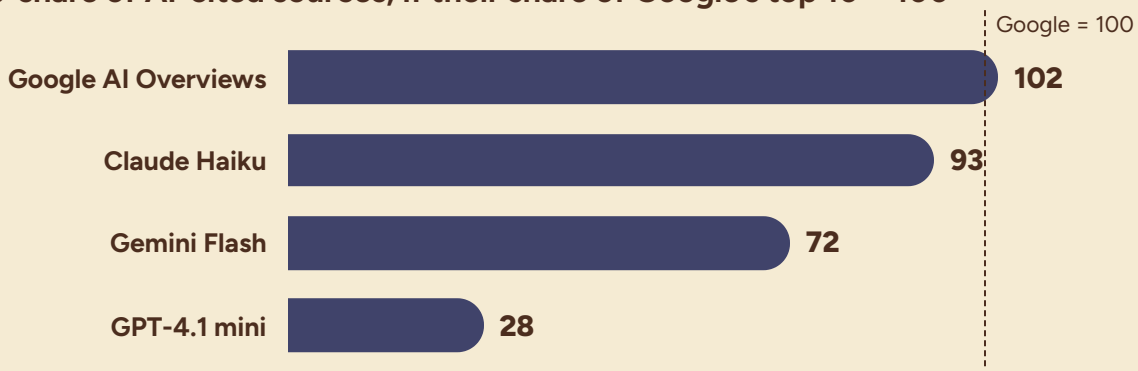
With URLs hidden, the same texts win 21%, so the content really is equal. An EMD for a different keyword drops to 10%, while the partial domain that does contain the right term jumps to 34%. Models reward a URL that matches the query, wherever the keyword sits.

A keyword in the URL path gets about 73% of the EMD effect. For free.

200 scenarios (US keywords, 2–4 words) × GPT-4.1 mini, Gemini Flash, Claude Haiku; domain names and display order randomised; full text and SERP-snippet variants. Base arm 20 repeats, others 10. EMD vs path +10 pp (95% CI +8 to +13), clustered by scenario.

In real AI answers, EMDs get no extra love

EMDs' share of AI-cited sources, if their share of Google's top 10 = 100



When the assistants actually search the web, they cite EMDs about as often as Google ranks them, or less. The controlled test only matters once your page is retrieved, and retrieval still depends mostly on ranking.

A correction

An earlier draft of this study had AI Overviews citing EMDs 1.5–1.7× more often. That was a bug in my domain classifier (it missed EMDs with extra words in the organic results), not a finding.

> **Don't buy an EMD for AI visibility. Write pages that deserve to be retrieved.**

AI Overview present on 59% of SERPs; platforms excluded on both sides. 95% CI for AI Overviews 0.86–1.22. Assistants: API with web search, 800 US keywords; cited and mentioned domains. Consumer apps can behave differently.

Also found

Smaller markets don't have more EMDs

Share of SERPs with an EMD: US 11.9%, UK 8.9%, HR 5.2%, IE 5.8%, NL 2.8% (918 translated local keywords). Too few EMDs there to model rankings separately.

Map packs care about the business name, a little

10% of business names in local map packs contain the keyword (12% of #1 listings), and 7% of listings link to an EMD. 2,547 SERPs had a map pack.

The .si wave barely touched commercial keywords

After September 2026 .si registrations surged. I built the .si version of ~1,100 commercial keywords from the study (bestvpn.si and friends) and checked certificate logs: 18 ever had an HTTPS site, 4 appeared after the wave. Google treats .si as Slovenian, not generic like .ai or .io. I'll recheck at +3 and +6 months.

EMDs rank for fewer keywords overall

At the same DR and links, EMD sites rank for roughly two thirds fewer keywords and get two thirds less traffic than brand sites. Partly because they tend to be small sites, so treat it as a description, not a cause.

So, should you buy an EMD?

- **Buy it if it's a good name for your business.**
  Joe's Denver Plumbing is a real brand too. Memorable and local is fine.
- **Don't pay a premium expecting rankings.**
  About one position for weak sites, maybe zero for young ones, and no head start for new domains.
- **Want the AI relevance boost? Use the URL path.**
  brand.com/best-plumber-denver gets most of what the EMD gets in LLM choices.
- **Build the site and earn links.**
  About 94% of new domains rank for nothing. That's the real problem.

Methodology

Keywords and SERPs

7,374 keywords from DataForSEO Labs across 10 industries in the US and UK, stratified by search volume (long-tail, mid, head) and filtered to commercial and transactional intent (informational allowed for tools). Brand, navigational and “near me” queries were removed. Keywords were picked regardless of whether an EMD ranks for them. Local queries with a city were fetched from that city. Top 20 organic results, AI Overviews and map packs via DataForSEO; DR, referring domains and traffic via Ahrefs; registration dates via RDAP.

Local extension sample

6,267 local keywords: 17 more local verticals (water damage, garage doors, towing, movers, solar, vets, wedding venues and others) in 20 big cities, plus all local verticals in 20 mid-size cities (Tulsa, Boise, Coventry, Swansea…). Used only for comparisons within a SERP; how often EMDs appear comes from the main random sample.

Domain classes

Class	Rule	Example (“hotel rentals”)
Exact	name = keyword; hyphens, plural, word order allowed	hotelrentals.com, hotel-rentals.com
All words	every keyword word plus something else	besthotelrentals.com
Partial	at least one core term	texaspremierplumbing.com
Brand	no keyword term	rotorooter.com
Generic brand	keyword-like name that is now a big brand	hotels.com
Platform	directories, marketplaces, UGC, big media	yelp.com, reddit.com

Ranking models

Linear model with SERP fixed effects (only domains on the same SERP are compared), restricted to DR ≤ 20 where EMDs and brand domains of similar strength exist side by side. Controls: DR bins, referring-domain deciles, log domain age. Standard errors clustered by SERP. Matched pairs: each EMD paired with brand domains on the same SERP with DR within ±5 and 0.5–2× the referring domains.

New-domain cohort

Certificate Transparency logs (crt.sh) searched by prefix for 36 niche terms with 21 prefixes (best, cheap, city names…); first certificate between May 2024 and June 2025. “Active” = valid certificate today, which doesn’t depend on ranking, so there is no survivor bias. EMD = the name read as a query has 10+ monthly searches (Google Ads data). Outcomes from Ahrefs (top-3/top-10 keywords, traffic) and a live SERP check for the domain’s own keyword.

AI

AI Overviews: EMD share among cited sources divided by EMD share in the organic top 10 for the same queries, keyword-level bootstrap. Assistants: 800 US keywords asked to GPT-4.1 mini, Gemini Flash and Claude Haiku with web search. Controlled test: 200 scenarios, five equally good texts generated per keyword, domain names and display order randomised, 3 models, full text and snippet variants; control arms with hidden URLs, keyword in path, and a mismatched EMD.

Statistics

Shares with Wilson 95% intervals; differences with bootstrap intervals. “Not reliable” in the main pages means the 95% interval includes zero.

Limitations

- The SERP comparison shows correlation, not causation. Causal evidence comes from the controlled AI test and, for Google, the new-domain cohort.
- Rankings are only observed for sites already in the top 20. Keyword in the title is controlled (it changes nothing), but overall on-page quality isn't: EMDs are often bought by SEOs, whose sites may be better optimised anyway.
- The cohort is measured once, 16–29 months after launch. A short early boost for new EMDs (fast indexing for the exact query that fades later) would not show up here.
- The cohort finds domains by name prefix (bestplumber…), so names ending with the keyword are under-represented. Domains without an HTTPS certificate are invisible.
- "Active" means a valid certificate; parked domains with certificates can slip in.
- Ahrefs metrics are estimates; small sites sometimes show inflated referring-domain counts from spam.
- AI answers are non-deterministic, and API answers aren't identical to the consumer apps.
- Registration dates miss expired domains that were re-registered.

Appendix A: EMDs by industry and market

Industry	Market	SERPs	Exact	Exact or all words
Affiliate reviews	UK	386	0.0%	5.4%
Affiliate reviews	US	388	0.0%	3.9%
E-commerce	UK	398	0.0%	2.5%
E-commerce	US	397	0.3%	1.3%
Finance	UK	398	0.0%	0.0%
Finance	US	394	0.5%	3.3%
Health & clinics	UK	283	3.9%	14.1%
Health & clinics	US	367	2.7%	28.3%
Home services	UK	316	12.7%	41.5%
Home services	US	388	8.8%	38.1%
Legal	UK	272	1.5%	11.8%
Legal	US	382	1.6%	24.9%
Real estate	UK	331	0.3%	0.3%
Real estate	US	390	1.0%	5.4%
Software / SaaS	UK	320	0.9%	1.2%
Software / SaaS	US	389	0.0%	0.8%
Tools & calculators	UK	398	3.5%	12.1%
Tools & calculators	US	395	2.5%	7.8%
Travel	UK	394	0.8%	6.1%
Travel	US	388	0.8%	7.0%

Appendix B: ranking model, all specifications

Positions gained vs a brand domain on the same SERP (positive = EMD ranks higher), 95% CI.

Sample	Class	n	Positions	95% CI
All weaker domains (DR 0–20)	Exact	364	+0.86	+0.13 to +1.60
All weaker domains (DR 0–20)	All words	2154	+0.51	+0.19 to +0.83
Under 5 years	Exact	119	+0.76	-0.73 to +2.24
Under 5 years	All words	631	+0.72	-0.07 to +1.50
Under 3 years	Exact	89	+0.23	-1.60 to +2.06
Under 3 years	All words	435	+1.20	+0.20 to +2.20
5 years or older	Exact	214	+0.93	-0.12 to +1.99
5 years or older	All words	1361	+0.50	+0.09 to +0.92
Local, big cities (extension)	Exact	69	-0.09	-1.80 to +1.63
Local, big cities (extension)	All words	254	+0.96	+0.07 to +1.85
Local, mid-size cities (extension)	Exact	150	+0.92	-0.22 to +2.06
Local, mid-size cities (extension)	All words	1027	+0.46	-0.02 to +0.94

Matched pairs

All EMDs: +0.19 (CI -0.25 to +0.62, 1,218 pairs). Both under 5 years: +1.06 (CI -0.45 to +2.62, 128 pairs). Top-3 chance, all pairs: +5.0 pp.

Costs

Module	Spent	Cap
dataforseo	$118.03	$160
ai_answers	$75.27	$100
llm_test	$30.93	$200
domains	$0.00	$240
reserve	$0.00	$50
Total	**$224.23**	$750

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