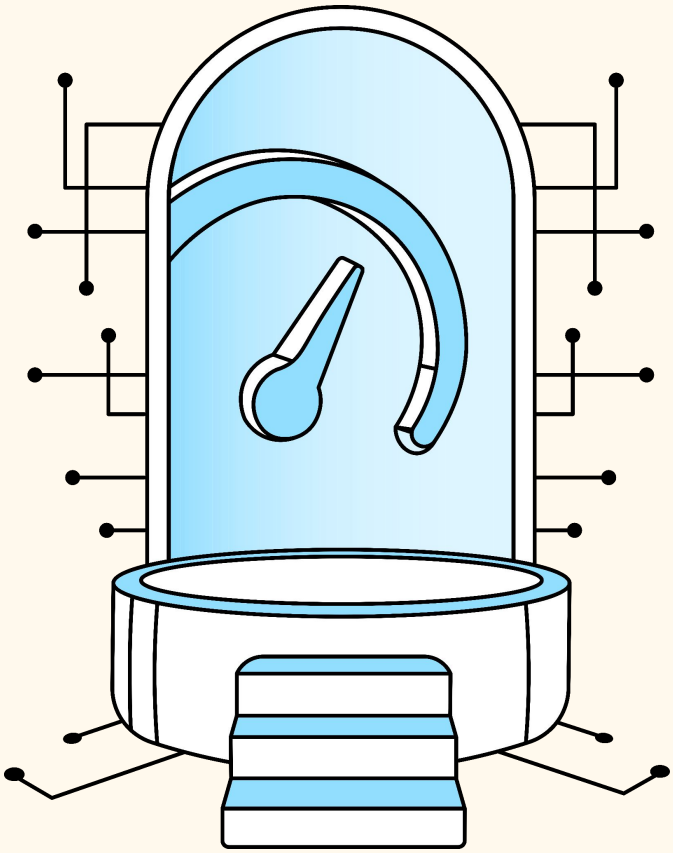

Navigating the New Era of AI Search

July 2025

brainlabs

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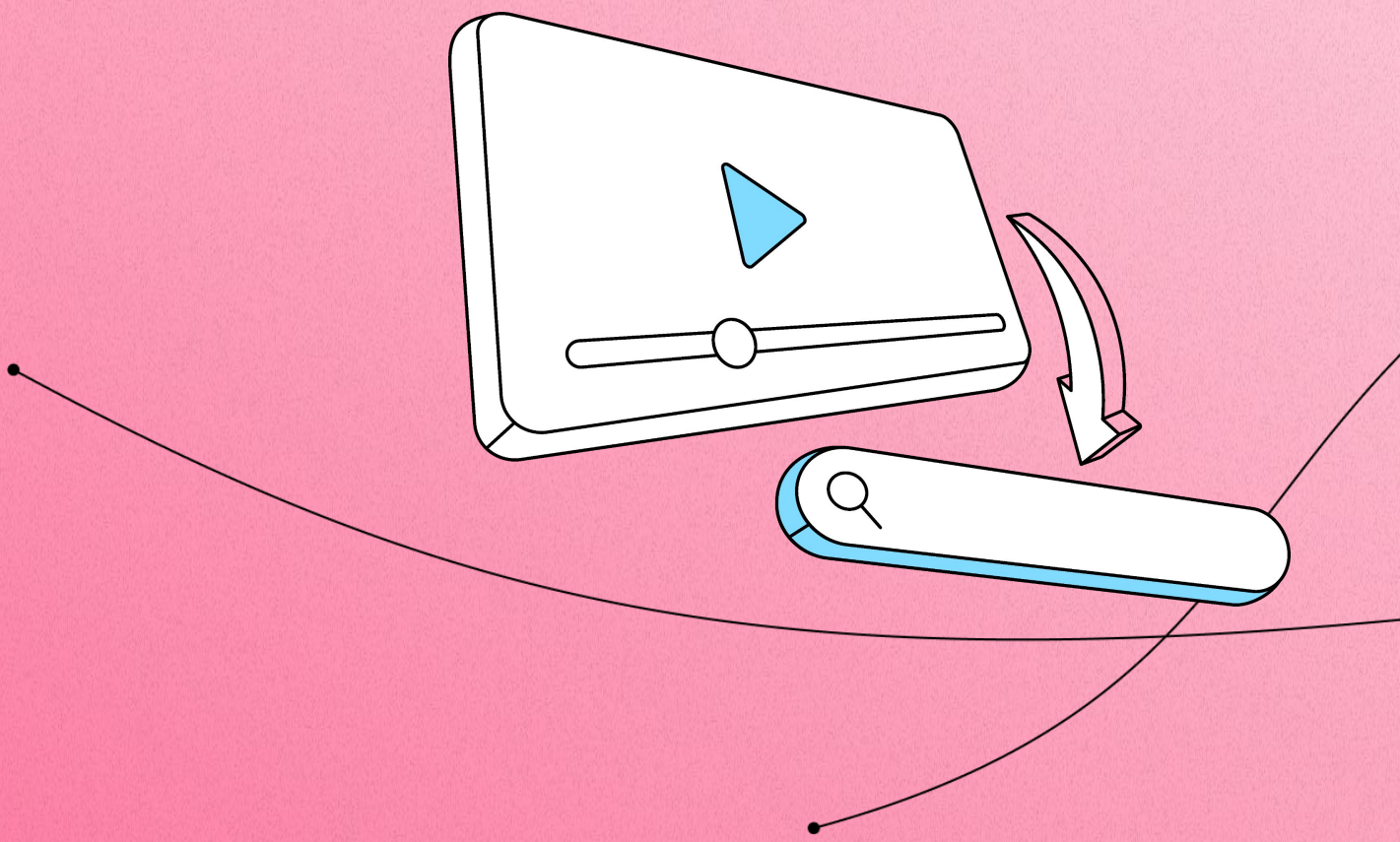
Part 01

How SEO is Changing



01 AI Search is Redefining SEO

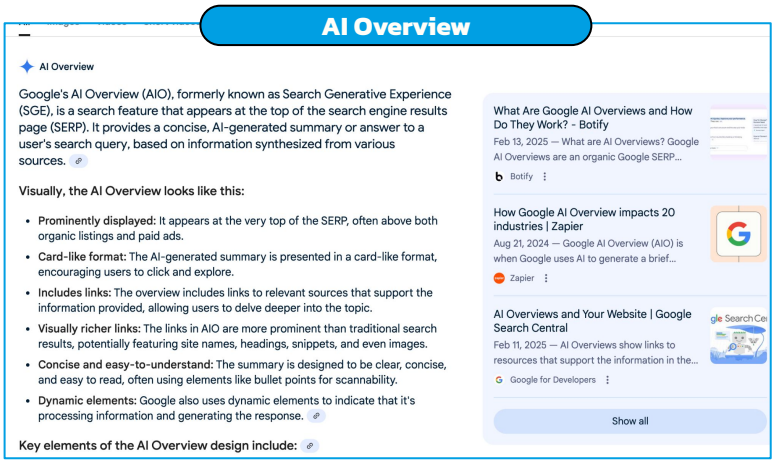
Simplifying the Terms

AI Search has become a broad, catch all term encompassing Google's AI Overviews (**AIO**), Google's **AI Mode**, Microsoft Copilot, and the growing field of publicly available large language model (**LLM**) tools like Perplexity, Claude, and OpenAI's ChatGPT.

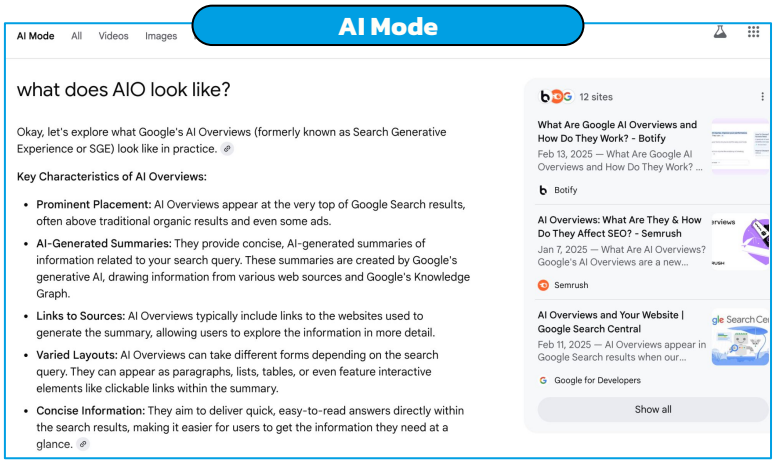
Each of these entry points functions differently, and many are interrelated:

- Claude – owned by Anthropic – is partly funded by Amazon and Google;
- Microsoft's Copilot is powered by OpenAI's GPT models and time will tell if that partnership holds or if Microsoft will launch their own LLM.
- Or that Google's **Gemini** (formerly *Bard*) powers **AIOs** (formerly *SGE*) and **AI Mode** and while their search results look *extremely* similar, their methods are significantly different.

AI Overview



AI Mode



Understanding these nuances is critical for marketers and SEOs looking to adapt effectively to a rapidly evolving search landscape.

A new name for SEO? No need.

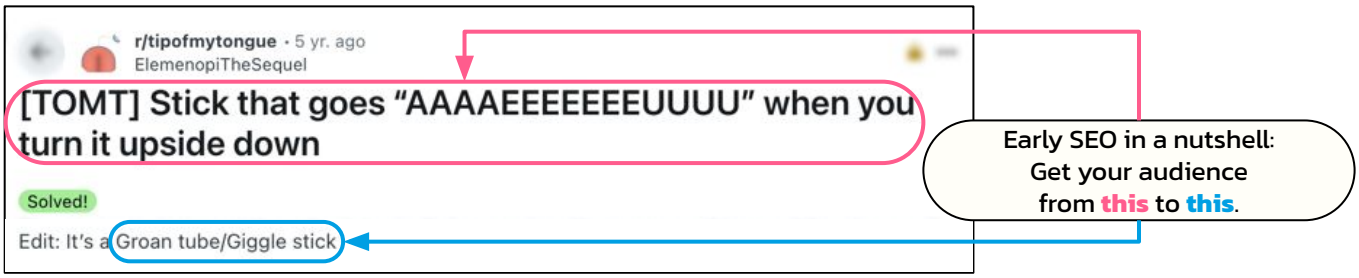
Finally, let's address – and promptly ignore – the race to coin a new term for SEO in the AI era. SEO is already an inclusive term for what we do: Search Everywhere Optimization (Sparktoro). If you really want to specify the *type* of SEO you're doing, just prepend the platform (e.g., AI SEO, YouTube SEO, Amazon, SEO, etc.)

- **AEO** = Answer Engine Optimization
  - **Commentary:** shouldn't you have been answering queries already?
- **AIO** = AI Overview *Optimization*
  - **Commentary:** a vocal few *really* want to confuse people with *AI Optimization* in addition to **AI Overview**; acronym death by a thousand cuts.
- **GEO** = Generative Engine Optimization
  - **Commentary:** increasingly confusing as SGE (search generative experience) was replaced by AIO, making it an outdated term and infinitely more confusing if you have local business listings as "geo" and local listing management (LLM) becomes its own jargon-laden tongue-twister.
- **SXO** = Search eXperience Optimization
  - **Commentary:** what are we, an airport?
- **LLMO** = Large Language Model Optimization
  - **Commentary:** is this *that part of the Alphabet you race through*? In all seriousness, this is the most egregious as it implies the role of an SEO is to optimize for machines, not people.

An SEO by any other name...

From Discovery to Credibility

Early on SEO was laser-focused on **Discovery**. The short-hand definition was *getting your website **found** by people who **don't know you exist***. This was still true with huge, globally recognized brands wherein discovery was often, "*we do* [**INSERT THING**] *too*."



Being discoverable is no longer enough. Nowadays, there's enough platforms to discover **if you exist**. More and more the question that immediately follows is:

- *are you real?*
- *are you reputable?*
- *do you **do** the thing you claim to do?*

Case in point, have you ever looked up a business on Google Maps during a holiday and it claims to be open, but you call to verify and – sure enough – *they are closed*? There's an obvious disconnect between who's managing the GBP and who's running the storefront.

Because LLMs search and aggregate on an ongoing basis, an SEO's role is evolving. Pushing a site's visibility isn't going to cut it. The role of marketers in an AI world is all about understanding and raising the brand's visibility across the entire internet.

SEO is about Creating Seamless Journeys

Traditional SEO aimed to point those every signal to the brand's website, curating the most relevant keywords and backlinks. What's happening now is user interactions, discussions forums, brand sentiment and feedback need to be applied to your brand's overall image. What this means is you cannot afford to "stay in your lane" and focus only on your website in today's AI-powered entry points.

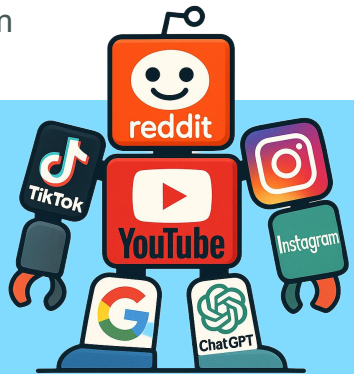
- Does a different department manage your video creation and YouTube channel? They need to talk with the SEO team for "YouTube SEO."
- Is your Influencer team is seeing success with their TikTok campaign? They should be chatting with the SEO team for "TikTok SEO."
- Does your phone-based customer service team has 5-star feedback while your online chatbot's feedback is bad? The SEO team, customer service team, and web developers need to talk for "Support SEO."

Simply put: "SEO is about influence. It's about building relationships between Product, Marketing, and Sales. Defining real business problems – before chasing solutions. Breaking down silos to create seamless customer journeys… people don't buy from websites. They buy from people.
And before a deal is closed, a champion inside that organization has to believe—truly believe—that saying yes to you is worth the personal risk. That's the real job of an SEO. Elevate the brand. Reduce friction. Build internal confidence." (Daniel K Cheung).

AI for Scale; SEOs for Strategy

The New SEO: Unifying Digital Strategy

The very definition of an SEO's role is shifting. It's no longer enough to simply optimize "web content." Over the last decade, top SEO professionals have recognized the need for multi-modal and multi-channel strategies, as visibility increasingly depends on more than just blog posts and metadata.
This is because every channel with a user intent now contributes to the search ecosystem, and artificial intelligence is actively synthesizing information from all of them.



The modern SEO must be:

- part **strategist**,
- part content **architect**,
- and part **internal diplomat**

ensuring that brand voice, authority, and clarity extend from websites to podcasts to YouTube, product feeds, Reddit and internal communications.

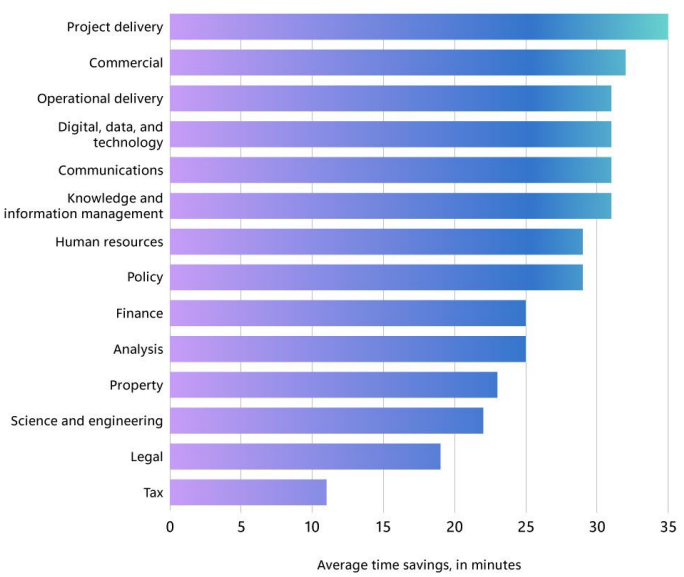
Platforms like Perplexity and Google's AI Overviews don't care which team made the content – they care whether it's credible, structured, and consistent. In this new era, **SEO is less of a channel and more a lens of customer search and experience applied across all digital strategy**.

Stop Asking AI for Favors; Make it Work for YOU

With enterprise sites, there are hundreds of thousands (sometimes millions!) of pages to maintain. Your quarterly SEO roadmap likely involved breaking the site down into manageable segments. This made sense in a pre-AI world. Now? AI makes scale possible.

Using AI to streamline discovery in SEO is a strategic shift that unlocks **real marketing value.** The identification of trends, keyword gaps, SERP shifts is a data-heavy, pattern-based task; in other words, perfect for AI! AI can analyze and highlight opportunities faster and more comprehensively than a human ever could.

With AI for data collection and categorization, SEOs can focus on analysis & strategy. They can effectively answer questions AI can't answer: Why is this opportunity worth prioritizing? How can we approach it in a way that's brand-aligned, user-centric, and creatively differentiated?



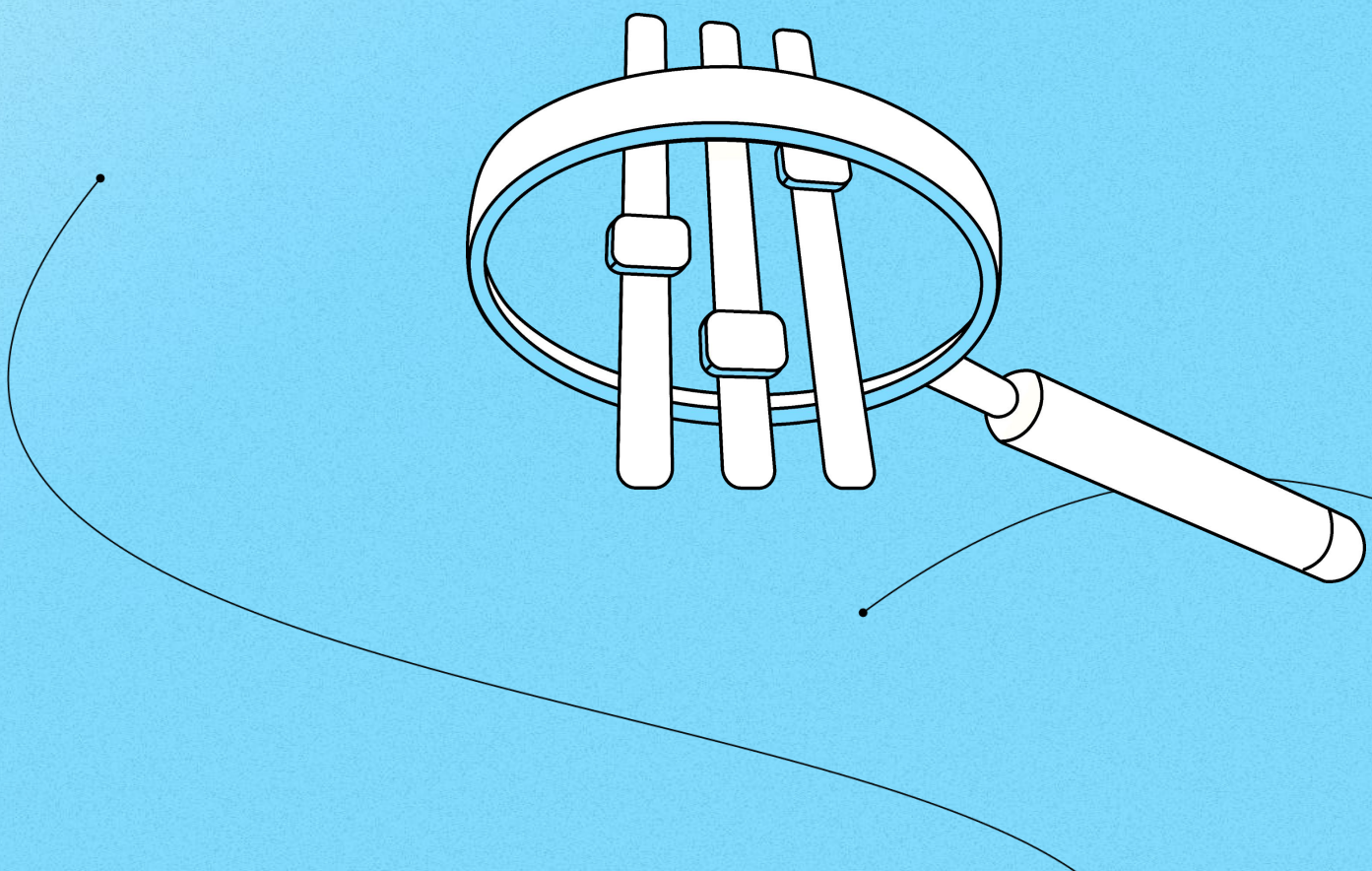
AI saves 25 mins per day (2 weeks per year): [Microsoft WorkLab study]

With AI for data collection and categorization, SEOs can focus on analysis & strategy. Effectively answering questions AI can't answer: Why is this opportunity worth prioritizing? How can we approach it in a way that's brand-aligned, user-centric, and creatively differentiated?

The real differentiator isn't who finds the keyword gap, **it's who turns that gap into a high-converting, memorable experience that actually gets implemented.**

Part 02

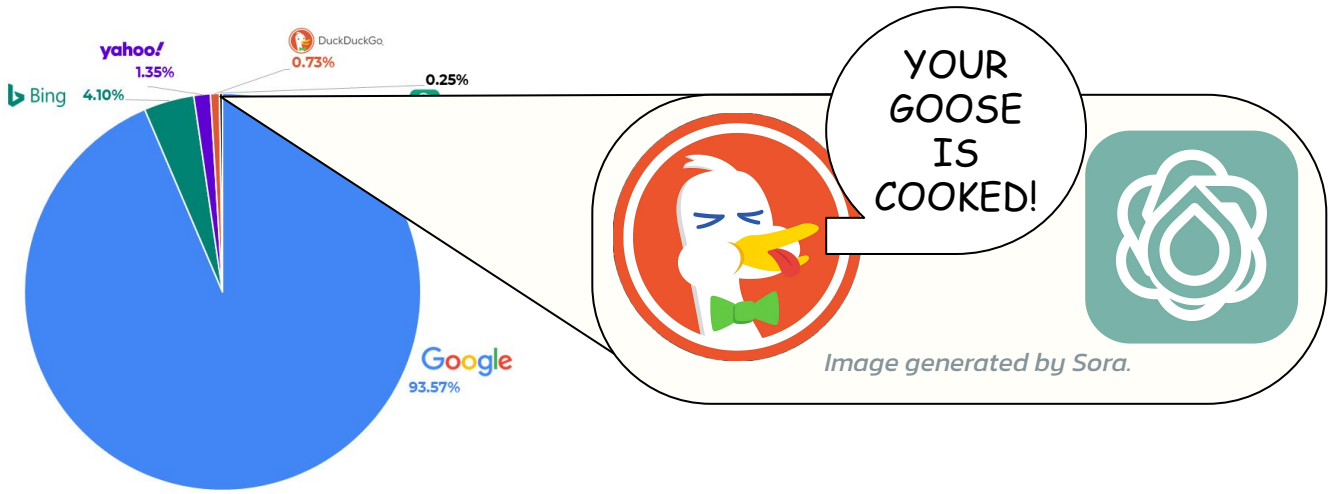
The Search Landscape Explained



04 The LLM Revolution is Coming, but Habits (and Brand Affinity) Die Hard

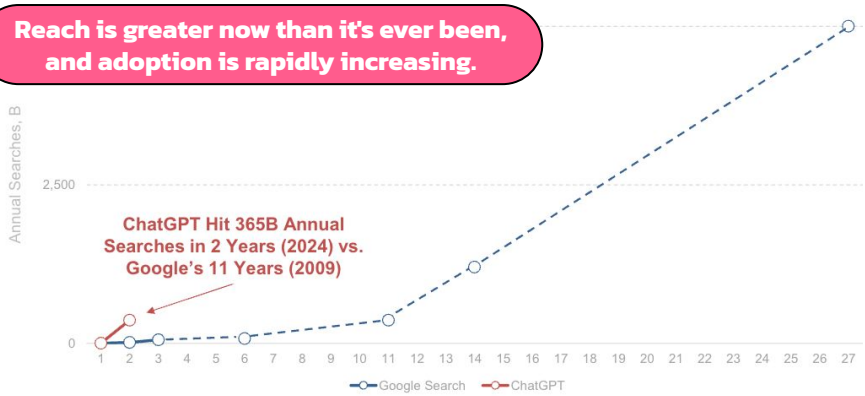
How Much Impact are LLMs Making?

According to a 2024 study from SparkToro, SEMrush, and Datos, **ChatGPT receives 373 times fewer searches than Google** and even **trails behind DuckDuckGo** in market share (SparkToro).



But if we compare timelines, ChatGPT's 365B messages (est. 37.5m searches) was achieved in 2 years vs Google's 11. And while this chart (below) doesn't account for the increase in devices and worldwide connectivity, it does help illustrate the adoption of new tech happens at an exponential rate. Look at commercial photography in the late 1800s vs 1980s vs today – where people take 5.3bn photos a day. AI Search is doing more than just taking a slice of Google's pie – it's making the whole 'search' menu bigger. This ultimately gives everyone more options: users find new ways to get answers, and companies find new avenues to reach them.

Reach is greater now than it's ever been, and adoption is rapidly increasing.



Source: Bondcap

Top Domains visited from search engines (US Desktop)

Q1 2025	Rank	Site name
	1	youtube.com
	2	facebook.com
	3	reddit.com
	4	instagram.com
	5	chatgpt.com
	6	whatsapp.com
	7	x.com
	8	wikipedia.org
	9	tiktok.com
	10	linkedin.com

Source: Datos

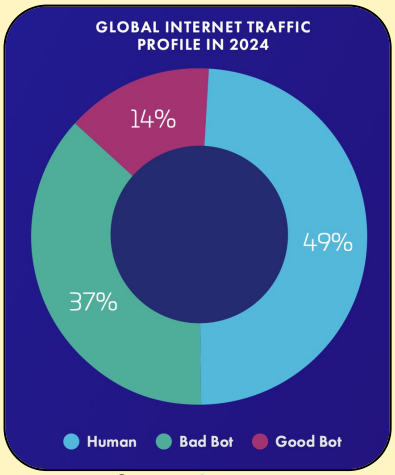
While AI-powered tools like ChatGPT may have led the wave, it's Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode – which are now embedded directly into the search experience – that are transforming how and where information appears.

Generative results don't simply **displace** traditional rankings, they're **replacing** them. The shift toward conversational, AI-generated queries is already altering visibility, trust, and click-through patterns. As of May 2025, AIO appear in 200 countries and 40 languages, with AI Mode currently live only in US.

Authenticity is Increasingly Important

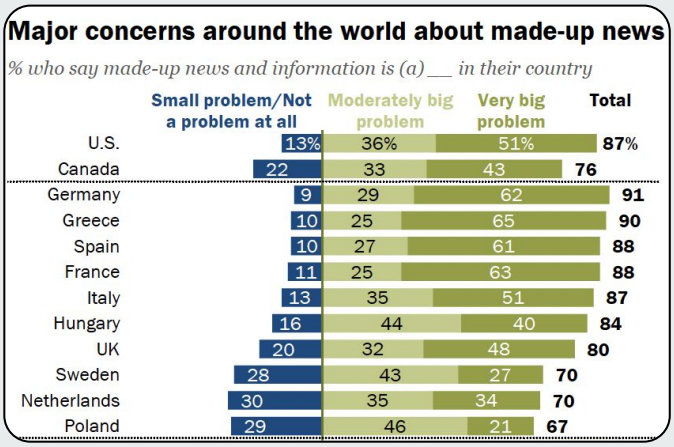
The democratization of AI means proving you're real is becoming increasingly difficult. Not to add *too* much credence to the Dead Internet Theory, but according to Imperva, 2024 was the first time bot traffic exceeded humans (Imperva).

There are more bots than humans exploring the web



Source: Imperva

People are more wary about information they're receiving



Source: Pew Research Center

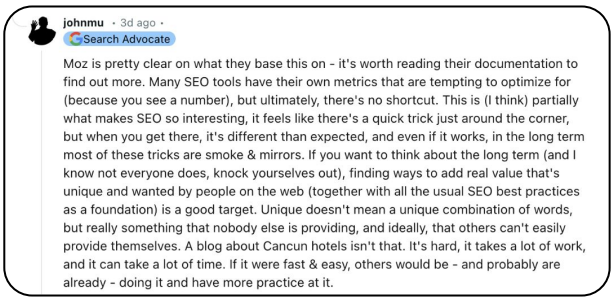
Google's Opinion? You Need Conviction

For over a decade, Google has delivered a consistent message: unique content wins. Their guidance has echoed through the years, emphasizing core principles:

- "Don't build links, build relationships."
- "Focus on EEAT."
- "Create content that fulfills user intent."

When discussions about penalties arose, Google representatives like John Mueller gave a clear message: If you're not seeing results, it's due to a lack of relevance rather than a punitive action (Webmaster Hangouts).

Source: Google SearchLiaison 2018



Source: Reddit Nov 2024
Could. Not. **BE**. Clearer.

Furthermore, the Core Algorithm Updates that have rolled out since **March 2018** have consistently reinforced these quality content guidelines and this continues to be true in 2025. So, what does this consistent messaging truly imply for us?

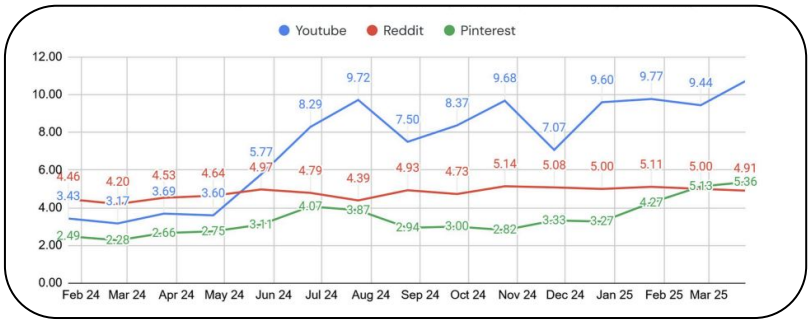
It means it's time to cultivate a strong point of view. Stop passively accepting the status quo and start carving out your unique perspective. It's about having conviction in your approach and daring to innovate, while using AI for efficiency. Read How to Sound Authentic in an AI World on the Tallent's Take: Marketing newsletter.

06 Authenticity is a Two-Way Street

Reddit: A Bastion of Authenticity

As we've observed in our previous POV, a growing number of users are appending their search queries with "Reddit." While traditional "organic traffic" from certain avenues may have shifted, the same cannot be said for platforms like TikTok, influencer content, and YouTube. In fact, YouTube recently became the most visited site from US desktop searches in Q1 2025. (*Source: Datos*)

So, why this shift? It's no surprise that the platforms gaining significant traction are those showcasing real people. Instead of encountering dense walls of text and conventional blue links, people are gravitating towards content where the content creators have a recognizable face and name.



videos continue to grow in searches

Not Generating Copy, Crafting a Narrative

Influencers, for instance, are masters of narrative. When they endorse a product, they don't simply tell their audience to buy something; instead, they provide context and conviction, explaining why they support it. This authenticity is paramount; without it, they risk losing their audience by appearing disingenuous (Influencity).

For too long, traditional brand websites have functioned as a **one-way marketing broadcast**. The audience was merely a target, not a participant; they weren't truly listened to or engaged with. This approach simply won't resonate anymore. To truly connect, marketers must actively integrate their audience into their strategy.

Brainlabs Real Intelligence™

Whether it's an AI bot scraping the web or a user seeking authentic perspectives, modern AI search is powered by the voices of **real people**. This is precisely where Brainlabs Real Intelligence™ excels.

Ingest thousands of signals to **identify the ones that matter**

This is ***Real Intelligence™***

- Understand where our customer is within the search landscape
- Identify the search topics and trends of value across multiple platforms
- Evaluate the content we need to produce using wider marketing insights

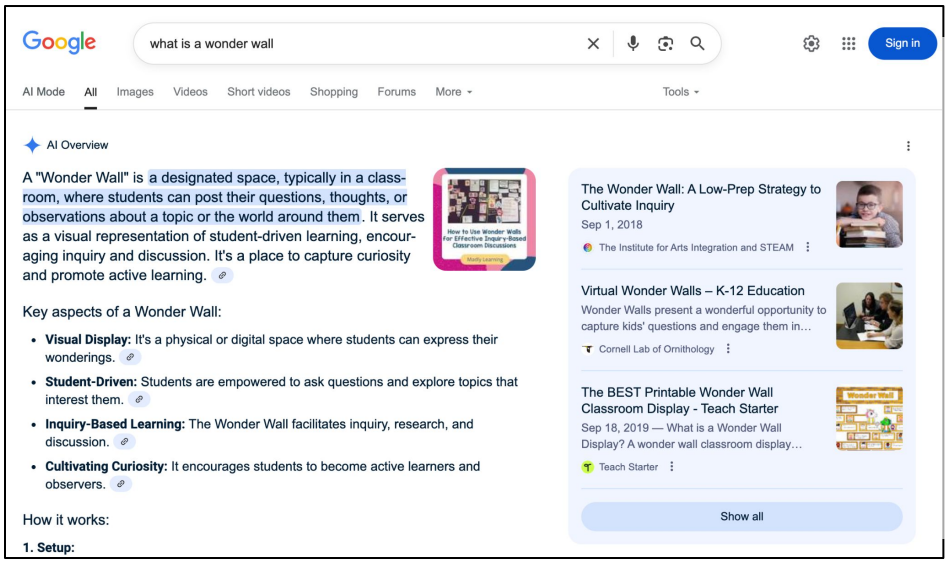
Our proprietary approach integrates signals from diverse platforms (including TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, Amazon, YouTube, and Google) to deliver a truly comprehensive understanding of your share of signals. This encompasses how your brand is being searched, prevailing brand sentiment, and the strategic opportunities your partner (*that's us*) can unlock.

Part 03

How to Optimize for AI Search

07 The Different Types of AI Search

AI Overview (AIO)



What is it? The new "Position 0" (*& sometimes position 2*)

Who Owns it? Google and it's powered by Google's primary LLM, Gemini.

Key Differentiation?

- 96% of links in AIO are from the top 10 organic results (seoClarity).
- Populates webpages, videos & social networks

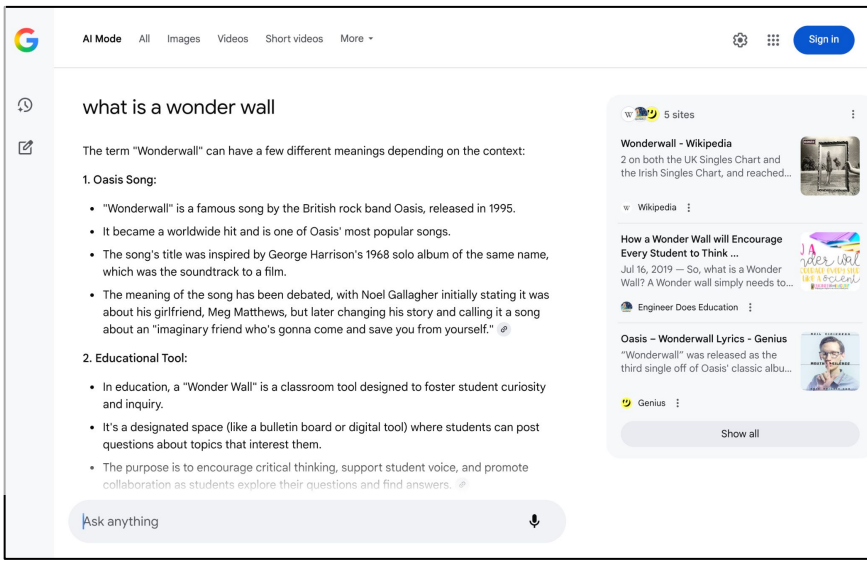
AI Mode

What is it? Google's response to ChatGPT search (*currently available in USA only*).

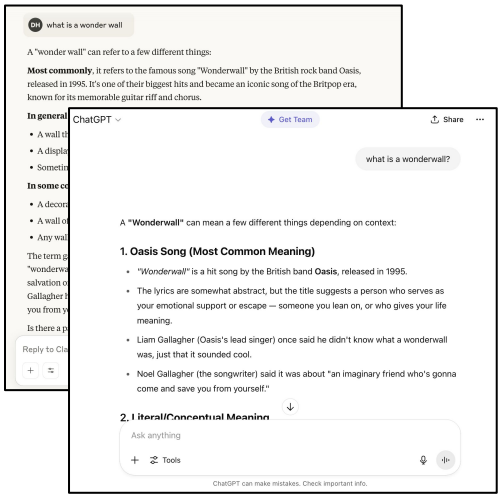
Who Owns it? Google and it's powered by Google's primary LLM, Gemini.

Key Differentiation?

- Searches fan-out queries taking in next probabilistic search.
- Utilizes contextual information from the user.
- Considers a multitude of sites related to your query.



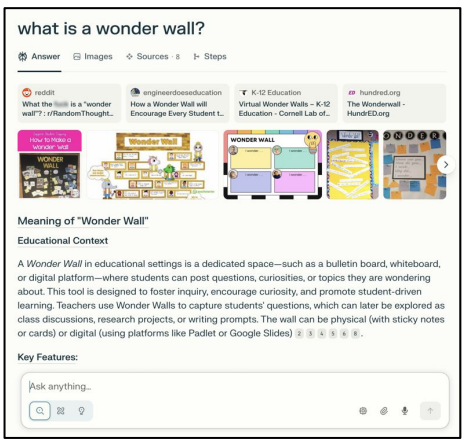
The LLMs (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity)



What are they? LLMs; Answer Engines

Who Owns it?

- ChatGPT by OpenAI
- Copilot by Microsoft
- Claude by Anthropic
- Perplexity by Perplexity
- Gemini by Google



Key Differentiation?

- Trained on historical data, most searches are not real-time
- Conversational queries with chatbots
- Commonly used for "Generation"

08 How To Optimize For **LLMs** (ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity)

Optimizing for LLMs Starts At The Next Model Training

How do you optimize for LLMs like ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity? Start by ensuring your site is always optimized for they periodically retrain their models (avoid JavsScript, which is more resource-intensive and difficult to crawl). Then, start by understanding *when* these models access the web.

Due to the leaked system prompt notes, we know how Claude works (Anthropic). We suspect ChatGPT and other LLMs operate similarly. For example, Claude only performs a web search in about half of user queries, typically when the prompt involves current events or complex, multi-dimensional tasks. To increase your chances of being cited, build a content strategy around queries that are more likely to trigger a search:

- **Timely topics like holidays, product launches, and breaking news.**

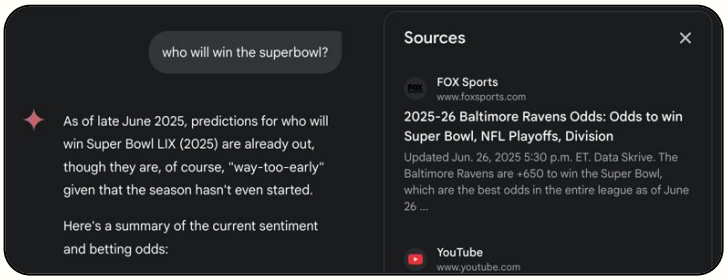
Query: *who won the superbowl in 1995?*

The Super Bowl in 1995 was **Super Bowl XXIX**. It was played on **January 29, 1995**, and the **San Francisco 49ers** defeated the **San Diego Chargers** with a score of **49-26**.

It was the 49ers' fifth Super Bowl victory, and quarterback **Steve Young** had a stellar performance, throwing for 6 touchdown passes and earning the game's MVP honors.

No links

Query: *who will win the superbowl?*



Web links

- **Create high-utility content that helps users make decisions, such as nuanced comparisons or contextual answers tailored to specific scenarios. For example:**

Query: *What's the best vacuum for a 2,600 sq ft home with hardwood floors and two shedding pets?*

Dyson Ball Animal 3 Upright

- **Why it's great:** Known for exceptional suction and deep-clean power. Great for pulling embedded pet hair from carpets and edges, and it transitions well on hardwoods. Features whole-machine HEPA filtration—ideal if allergies are a concern. people.com +11
- **Size & extras:** Upright design with specialized pet tools; bagless 0.2 L bin.
- **Price:** ~$299.
- **Best for:** Maximum suction and versatile deep cleans on mixed flooring.

While this may seem extremely specific, this goes a long way toward an "Audience-First" approach.

Perplexity: the "Answer Engine"

LLMs often pull from internal knowledge for simple facts, which can limit the visibility of evergreen or glossary-style content.

That said, tools like Perplexity actively scan the web for real-time answers and include links by default. Optimizing for timeliness, depth, and utility — alongside structured data and clear authorship — can increase your odds of being surfaced across all LLMs, regardless of how they retrieve or present information.

How To Optimize For **Google AI Mode**

SERP = Destination; SERP ≠ Starting Point

Google's AI Mode marks a fundamental evolution in how users interact with search. Traditionally, users typed a query → received a search engine results page (SERP) → clicked a link → and if it didn't meet their needs, they bounced back or refined their query. This leaves Google to infer intent from those behaviors.

Step 1: Query

What is a WonderWall?

Step 2: Fan-Out Queries

- `What is a wonderwall meaning`
- `Oasis Wonderwall meaning`
- `Wonderwall 1968 film meaning`
- `Wonderwall slang meaning`
- `Wonderwall meaning in popular culture`

Step 3: Aggregate Resources with Topical Authority

- **The Oasis Song:** Multiple sources confirm that "Wonderwall" is a famous song by Oasis and offer varying interpretations of its meaning. Noel Gallagher's conflicting statements about the song's meaning were noted.
- **The 1968 Film:** Information about the 1968 film "Wonderwall" was found, including its plot and George Harrison's soundtrack contribution. The connection between the film and the Oasis song's title was also noted.
- **Slang/Popular Culture Usage:** Search results revealed that "Wonderwall" is used as a slang term for something or someone impressive or as a reference to amateur guitarists.

AI Mode removes that trial-and-error loop. Instead of acting as an intermediary, AI Mode handles the exploration directly. This creates a seamless continuity to the search journey where the model **anticipates based on previous searches and personalized data**, adapts based on the context of the search (time of day, location, etc.), and iterates in real time; minimizing clicks and maximizing user stickiness within Google's ecosystem.

As seen in the rise of zero-click searches, this type of experience has been a long-time coming, and AI Mode is simply an evolution of what was already present.

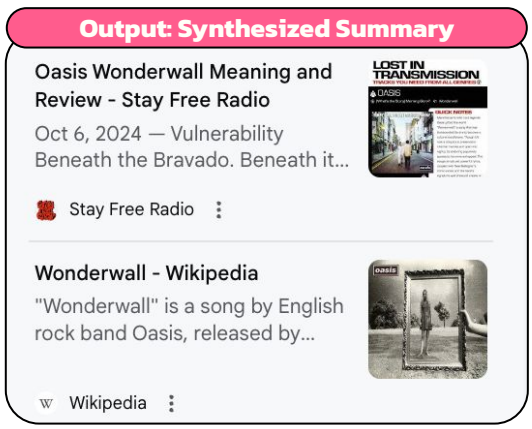
From Niche to Network: Deeper Topical Relevance

This shift is further exemplified by AI Mode's use of **fan out queries**. This is a process where the model expands the original user query into **multiple semantically related subqueries**. It then scours the web, including sites, forums, and discussion boards, to gather diverse perspectives and data points. This is one of the key reasons Google's AI Mode is accelerating the shift toward **multi-modal content**. To be part of the LLM-driven conversation loop, brands must understand how users interact with their products across formats — not just in written content, but through videos, podcasts, and community discussions.

LLMs like those behind AI Mode pull from a wide range of content types, including video transcripts, forum replies, and audio metadata. **This means traditional, website-only SEO tactics won't cut it.**

Brands need to optimize across formats using structured transcripts and platform-specific metadata to ensure inclusion. We're no longer in the era of **Search Engine Optimization** — we're now operating in the age of **Search Everywhere Optimization** (Sparktoro).

Output: Synthesized Summary

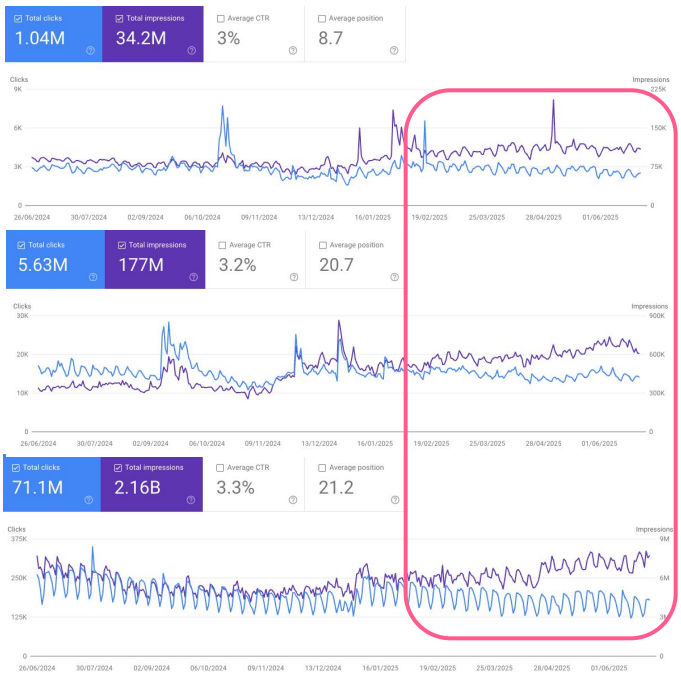


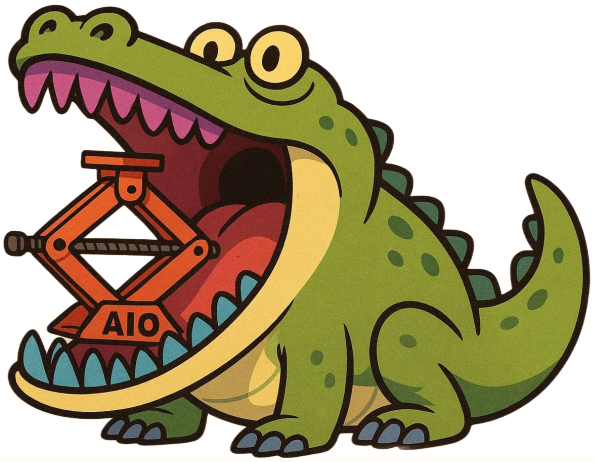
AIO's Impact on Search

Let's talk about AI Overviews (AIO). You're probably noticing that familiar trend in Google Search Console: **impressions** are climbing, but **clicks** are steadily dropping. This widening gap signals that AIO is directly answering user queries on the SERP, reducing the need for a user to click through to your site *unless* they're ready to buy – and sure enough, revenue for most is stable or improving.

AIOs mark a shift in search behavior, putting a spotlight on the most relevant *platform*. This means site traffic isn't and hasn't been the leading metric for SEO. With this new SERP, the question isn't "*how do I get more clicks?*" it's "**how do I boost revenue when clicks aren't guaranteed?**"

The only way to gain a new customer is **to be visible**. To gain visibility in AIOs, you need to focus on your brand's share of voice across platforms. This calls for tactics like creating multi-modal content & tailored strategies for different audiences.





It's June 2025, have you checked your GSC crocodile's teeth?

How to Rank in AIO

Most AIOs pull from the top 10 organic results. So beyond traditional ranking factors, AIO favors three things: **simplicity**, **structure**, and **specificity**.

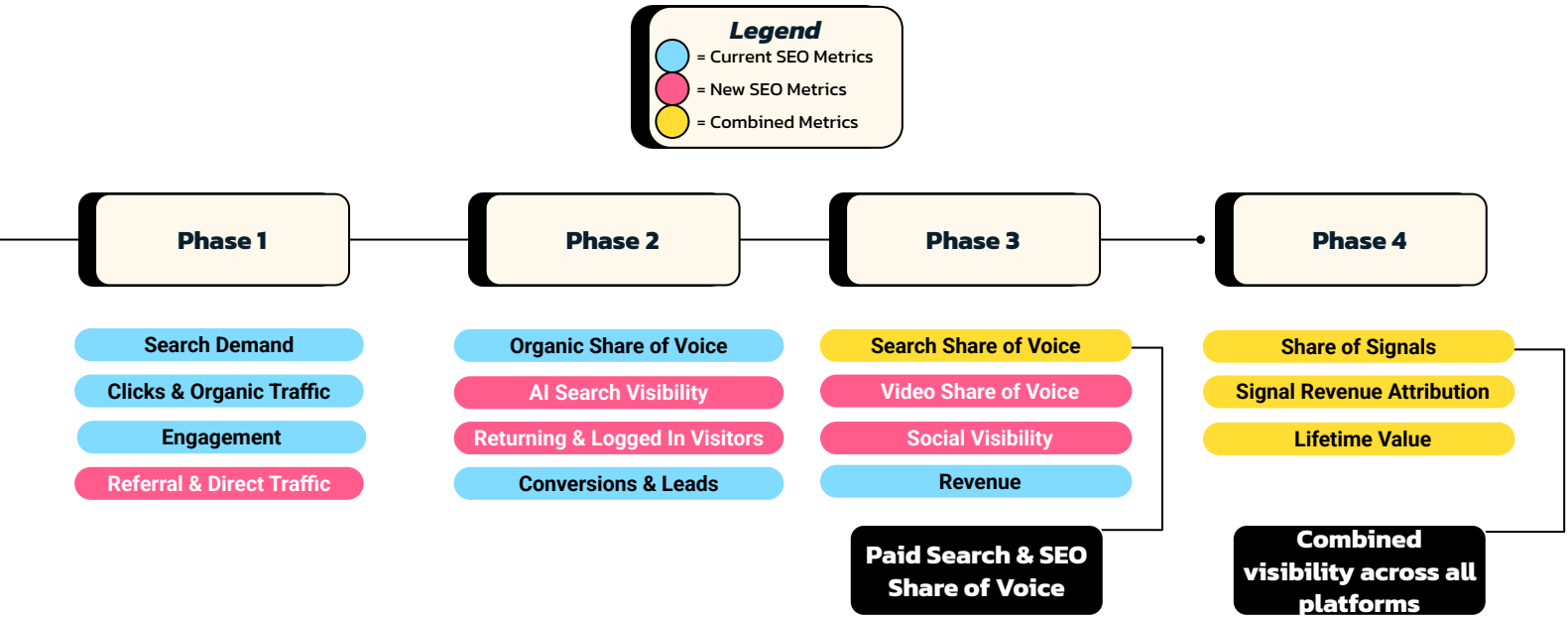
- **Simplicity** means keeping answers short – ideally <80 words. Get straight to the point with clarity (no fluff).
- **Structure** refers to how your content is formatted; clear use of **heading tags**, **paragraph tags**, and **bullet points** makes it easier for AIO to extract and summarize information. If your page is messy or ambiguous, it may skip you entirely.
- **Specificity**, while it may seem at odds with *simplicity*, it's fundamental to EEAT. It's about using precise, domain-appropriate language that signals genuine subject-matter expertise. For instance, if you're writing for maritime professionals and mispronounce "**focsle**" as "*forecastle*," you're immediately flagged as an outsider.

Generative systems like AIO don't just reward, simplicity & structure — they also detect and favor **authentic expertise**. As tools like seoClarity have shown, structured HTML and topic-specific language both increase your likelihood of inclusion in AI-generated summaries.

Your Strategy Is Only As Good As Your Data

One of the most successful ways to prepare for this new world is to have impeccable data hygiene across all of your platforms and warehouse them in one place so you can run correlative analysis. The truth of the matter is that **attribution is getting more difficult**. Any marketer's guiding light should be **revenue**, but it's still important to look at leading indicators like **visibility**. The truth is, if people can't find you on their preferred platforms, they can't purchase from you.

Most companies need a phased approach to tackle their KPI evolution. We recommend the following phases. Based on your data evolution, you can decide where you are in this journey.



New Metrics In An AI-First World

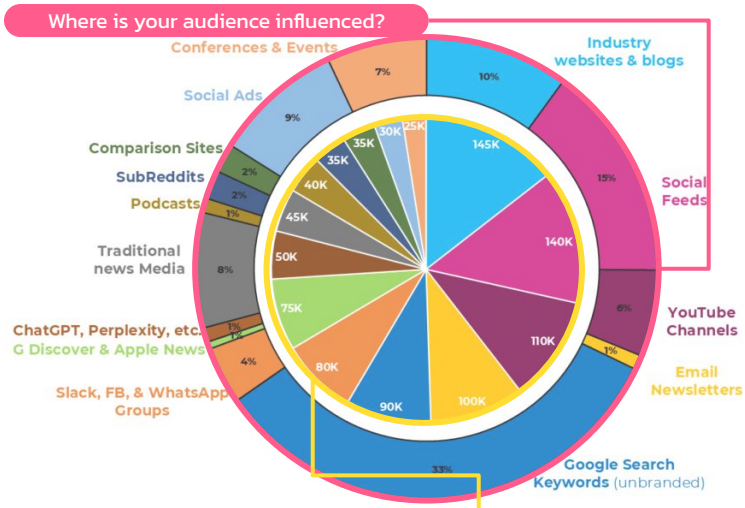
While the industry is still working with limited data, there are key metrics SEOs can begin tracking *now*.

- First, monitor **referral traffic.** This is where GA4 and Adobe Analytics currently categorize visits from tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity. Track how much traffic comes from these sources and how it changes over time. You can regroup this data under organic, and we believe this ***should* count as organic traffic**.
- Second, keep a close eye on **branded searches, returning users** and **direct traffic**, particularly in relation to your content strategy. When users come back directly, it signals *trust* – they're no longer discovering you, they're seeking you out *first*.
- Third, track **AIO visibility**. Inclusion here suggests your site is optimized & recognized as a high-EEAT source and considered trustworthy by the algorithm.
- Fourth, Google has **confirmed that AIO and AI Mode are included as Clicks & Impressions in Search Console** (Google Support), but they're aggregated with all results. This makes it difficult to analyze specific insights from AIOs or AI Mode, but it's better to have the data than not.

Tips To Future-Proof Your SEO Strategy

Truly win in the world of AI search is about more than latest hacks or best practices. It's about getting everyone on board. Winning means **executing** and executing means **garnering organizational influence**.

- **Audience Strategy**
  - Your marketing strategy should be rooted in where your audience is, how they are influenced, and how they purchase. With audience research, you'll quickly realize diversification is key (Sparktoro).
- **Content Expansion By Audience Segment**
  - Audiences want personalization; that should be the standard. Listen to your audience and create content that speaks to *them*.
- **Authenticity Wins**
  - Have subject matter experts byline & connect with your audience as influencers do. Don't hide authors, let them speak to audiences directly.



Source: Sparktoro

Remember, people buy from people (No Mercy, No Malice).

- **Omnichannel, Multi-Modal Content**
  - Own multiple platforms with multi-modal content redistributed across platforms. Make space in your content budget for videos, infographics, images, podcasts, and more. AI tools make it easier than ever.
- **Search Everywhere Optimization**
  - Platforms are prepended to SEO (AI SEO, Amazon SEO, YouTube SEO, etc.) because they are influential search engines in the customer journey. SEOs have the skill set to optimize for the customer journey, and we should optimize *everywhere* that audience is.
- **Holistic Search (Paid: Amazon, Google Ads, LinkedIn)**
  - Integrating Paid Search and Organic Search strategies is now table stakes to ensure you're more visible than ever. Break silos, integrate and data-share to unlock efficiencies and develop an intentional strategy for search engine domination.
- **CRO**
  - For search-optimized sites, we're living in a world where less clicks to your site are lost to TikTok, Amazon, YouTube and ChatGPT. Make the most of the visits you *do* get with CRO. 1st party data has always yielded success.

Win By Being A Maestro, Not An SEO

brightonSEO.

Having worked with hundreds of enterprise organizations, we have learned that actioning all of this is easier on paper. Nevertheless, the world doesn't need more SEOs. The world needs maestros who use their unique superpower of customer research, site experience, and SEO to drive influence and innovation across the entire organization. Getting teams operating on one vision and system is how to win in this world of search. Watch Travis Tallent break this down at brightonSEO.

brainlabs

Thank you

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