

AI Search, Today and Tomorrow

A Combined Study in Three Parts

State of the Art Digital | Published July 2026 | Combining Your Business Is Becoming Invisible,
Search Doomsday Is Q3 2027, and The Chaff Effect

Introduction

This study began as three separate reports, published across 2026 as the shift they describe was still unfolding. It is presented here as one document because the three were never really separate arguments. They are three stages of the same one.

Your Business Is Becoming Invisible established that AI interception of search traffic is not a forecast. It is a measurable, current condition, already visible in click-through data and traffic dashboards across UK automotive retail, estate agency, and adjacent sectors. Search Doomsday Is Q3 2027 set out the timeline, identifying the point at which AI interception stops being a channel-level disruption and becomes the defining structural reality of digital visibility. The Chaff Effect addresses what comes after that point is reached: not a smaller version of the old search landscape, but a changed one, where the queries and customers left for traditional organic search are harder to win, not easier.

The Q3 2027 date at the centre of the second report is worth being plain about. It is not a third-party forecast. It is my own extrapolation, built by projecting the current trajectory of AI Overview coverage, zero-click growth, and AI click interception forward against the data available through mid-2026. I have named it as directly as I have because the numbers, tracked quarter by quarter since, have continued to hold together rather than diverge from that projection. That is a meaningfully different claim from “an analyst predicted this,” and I would rather it be understood that way from the outset than have a reader assume otherwise and discover the difference later. Throughout, the study is read through the OPTIMUM framework, the seven-dimension methodology developed by State of the Art Digital to assess and remediate AI search visibility with the rigour of a professional audit rather than a marketing checklist. OPTIMUM distinguishes two layers of readiness. Tier 1 is the technical and structural foundation, without which a business is largely invisible to AI systems regardless of the quality of its content. Tier 2 is the intent-driven content and citation-cluster architecture built on top of that foundation, the layer that determines not merely whether a business can be cited, but whether it is cited correctly, consistently, and ahead of its competitors. The distinction matters because most businesses, and a good deal of the industry advising them, are still solving for Tier 1 problems using Tier 2 language.

The data underpinning this study has been reconciled to a single, current set of figures at the time of publication, drawn primarily from Google's own disclosures, SparkToro, Semrush, and Conductor, alongside named third-party trackers. Where an earlier forecast cited in one of the original reports has since diverged from what has actually been observed, that divergence is stated rather than quietly corrected out of view.

It is also worth being direct about what this study is and is not. It is a synthesis of publicly available industry data and independent OPTIMUM audit findings, UK-focused and weighted toward automotive retail and estate agency, with clear relevance to financial services, accountancy, and SME sectors more broadly. It is not primary academic research, and it does not claim to be.

One further thing is worth flagging early, because it will matter more with each passing quarter rather than less. AI citation behaviour is not static. As it evolves, so does the practical response required to remain visible within it. What began as a single audit product has already extended into a tiered structure, a diagnostic entry point, a full citation-cluster build, and ongoing monthly monitoring, precisely because a one-off audit has a shelf life that AI platforms are shortening every quarter. Where relevant, this study flags the specific junctures at which that evolution has occurred, not as a sales device, but because the shape of the solution is itself evidence for the argument being made.

The three parts that follow can each be read on their own. Read together, in sequence, they form a single account of how AI has changed search, and what a serious response to that change now looks like. A combined dictionary of terms and bibliography appears at the end, consolidating the separate glossaries and source lists from the original three reports.

Steve Coulter – State Of The Art Digital – July 2026

Part One: Your Business Is Becoming Invisible

Executive Summary

Something has changed. Not gradually, and not in a way that will reverse itself. The relationship between businesses and their customers has always been mediated by search, and for the better part of three decades that meant Google. A business that ranked well on Google was visible. A business that did not, was not. The rules were understood, the investment was clear, and the system, however imperfect, was legible.

That system is now being dismantled. Not replaced by a better search engine, but superseded by something categorically different: artificial intelligence that answers questions directly, without sending users to websites at all. The implications for any business that depends on internet traffic are profound, and in many cases immediate.

The shift is no longer a forecast. It is measured, documented, and already costing businesses traffic, enquiries, and revenue.

The scale of the behavioural change is now verifiable. Sixty-eight per cent of all Google searches end without a single click to any website. When Google's AI Overviews are present, organic click-through rates have fallen 61 per cent. HubSpot, one of the most sophisticated SEO operations in the world, lost between 70 and 80 per cent of its organic traffic in under twelve months. These are not projections. They are outcomes already visible in web analytics dashboards across every sector.

For businesses in automotive retail, estate agency, local services, and professional services, this is not a future concern. It is a present commercial reality.

68%

of all Google searches now end with no click to any website

SparkToro / Similarweb, 2026

61%

drop in organic click-through rate when Google serves an AI answer above results

Seer Interactive, Sept 2025

70%-80%

of HubSpot's organic traffic lost in under twelve months

Ahrefs / HubSpot CEO, Q1 2025

Against this backdrop, State of the Art Digital has conducted OPTIMUM audits across businesses in UK automotive retail and residential estate agency. The findings are consistent. Assessed across seven dimensions of AI search visibility, the average readiness score was 5.5 out of 10, against a 7/10 threshold OPTIMUM audit data associates with reliable AI citation. The majority of businesses audited scored below six in at least four of the seven dimensions. In no case had the business previously assessed its AI visibility in any structured form.

The purpose of this report is to explain, as plainly as possible, what has changed, which businesses are most at risk, and what a structured response looks like. The OPTIMUM framework provides that

structure. It is a seven-dimension diagnostic that assesses AI visibility with the rigour typically associated with a professional audit, and produces a clear, prioritised remediation plan.

The businesses that act now will not merely survive the transition. They will own it.

SECTION 1: WHAT HAS CHANGED

From Ranking to Citation

The architecture of search has shifted

For most of the internet age, the logic of search was straightforward. Users typed a query, Google returned a list of links, and the businesses that appeared near the top received a disproportionate share of clicks. Success in this environment was measurable and, to a degree, manageable. An investment in search engine optimisation could be tracked against traffic, and traffic against revenue. The relationship, whilst never perfectly linear, was coherent.

The arrival of AI Overviews within Google search, and the parallel rise of standalone AI platforms including ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Microsoft Copilot, has broken that coherence. These tools do not curate a list of links for users to evaluate. They synthesise an answer from multiple sources and present it directly. They have, in effect, placed themselves between the user and every website on the internet.

The consequences are not theoretical. Seer Interactive analysed 3,119 informational queries across 42 organisations, covering more than 25 million impressions. Organic click-through rates for queries where Google serves an AI Overview have fallen 61 per cent since June 2024. Even on queries where no AI Overview appeared, click-through rates fell by 41 per cent over the same period. The broader behavioural shift is happening independently of whether AI Overviews are present or not.

HubSpot's CEO Yamini Rangan addressed the decline directly on the company's Q1 2025 earnings call. Her observation is worth noting precisely because it came from a business whose own SEO operation had been regarded as exemplary.

"Organic search traffic is declining globally. AI Overviews are giving answers, and fewer people are clicking through to websites."

Yamini Rangan, CEO HubSpot. Q1 2025 earnings call.

The distinction that matters most in this new environment is the difference between ranking and being cited. A business can rank in position one on Google and receive no benefit from that position if an AI Overview answers the query above it. Conversely, a business whose content is structured

to be cited by AI systems will appear in the synthesised answer itself, commanding a form of visibility that no traditional ranking can replicate.

This is not an incremental change in how search engine optimisation works. It is a structural change in how discovery happens. The businesses that understand this distinction, and act upon it, will compound their advantage with every quarter that passes.

The Zero-Click Economy

The concept of the zero-click search predates AI Overviews, but AI has accelerated it to a point where it must now be considered the default rather than the exception. A zero-click search is one in which the user receives a satisfactory answer on the search results page itself, without clicking through to any website.

Sixty-eight per cent of all Google searches now end without a click. Zero-click searches grew from 60 per cent in 2024 to 68 per cent by early 2026 according to SparkToro's Similarweb-panel analysis, the fastest two-year acceleration the metric has shown. When AI Overviews are present, the zero-click rate rises to 83 per cent. In Google's AI Mode, it reaches 93 per cent.

Pew Research tracked 68,000 real searches from 900 adults in the United States and found that users clicked a result only 8 per cent of the time when an AI summary appeared, compared with 15 per cent when no summary was present. Users are 26 per cent more likely to end their search session entirely after seeing an AI Overview than after seeing standard results. The click is not merely being reduced. For a growing share of queries, it has ceased to exist.

For businesses whose customer acquisition rests on attracting visitors from search, this is not a peripheral concern. The traffic they have been optimising for is diminishing not because their websites have deteriorated, but because the architecture of the environment in which those websites existed has fundamentally changed.

SECTION 2: WHEN RANKINGS HOLD BUT TRAFFIC VANISHES

The HubSpot Warning

What happens when clicks stop arriving for pages that still rank

HubSpot is not a cautionary tale about a poorly managed digital presence. It is one of the most respected marketing platforms in the world, with an in-house SEO team that set the standard for content-led organic growth for over a decade. Between November 2024 and the second quarter of 2025, HubSpot lost between 70 and 80 per cent of its organic search traffic. Its rankings did not collapse. Its impressions held. The click simply stopped arriving.

The cause was structural. HubSpot had built much of its traffic on informational content: sales templates, cover letter guides, marketing definitions. These are precisely the query types AI

Overviews answer directly. Google's AI read HubSpot's content, synthesised the answer, and delivered it on the results page. The user was satisfied. No visit was recorded.

If HubSpot, with one of the best SEO teams in the world, can experience this, none of us are safe.

Industry analyst reaction, widely circulated on LinkedIn, early 2025.

HubSpot is the most prominent example, but the pattern repeats across the wider publishing and content industry:

1. Forbes experienced a 50 per cent organic traffic decline year-on-year by mid-2025
2. Business Insider lost 55 per cent of its organic search traffic between 2022 and 2025, leading to a 21 per cent staff reduction in May 2025
3. CNN suffered traffic declines of between 27 and 38 per cent year-on-year
4. 37 of the top 50 US news websites recorded year-on-year traffic declines in May 2025
5. Global publishers collectively saw Google traffic fall by approximately one third in 2025

Most agency portfolios serving content-heavy clients are recording traffic losses of between 30 and 70 per cent on informational queries. Rankings remain flat. Impressions are stable or rising. BrightEdge documented a 49 per cent year-on-year increase in search impressions alongside a 30 per cent drop in average click-through rates in May 2025. More visibility, fewer visits. That is the zero-click economy in a single data point.

There is a further complication that makes the picture harder to manage. The overlap between pages that rank in Google's top ten organic results and pages cited inside AI Overviews has collapsed. In mid-2025, approximately 75 per cent of URLs cited in AI Overviews also held a top-ten organic ranking. By early 2026, that overlap had fallen to between 17 and 38 per cent. Your ranking and your AI visibility are now separate problems requiring separate strategies.

SECTION 3: WHO IS MOST AT RISK

The Sectors Where the Stakes Are Highest

Not every business is equally exposed to the shift in search behaviour, but certain sectors are structurally more vulnerable than others. What they share is a common dependency: customers find them through search, and the decision to enquire, visit, or purchase is typically preceded by a research phase conducted online. These are precisely the queries AI is now answering directly.

Automotive Retail

Car buyers conduct an average of twelve hours of research before visiting a dealership.

Estate Agency

Property buyers and sellers begin their process online, often months before they

AI systems are now fielding a significant proportion of those research queries directly, synthesising comparisons, surfacing reviews, and in some cases recommending specific models without ever directing the user to a dealer's website. Businesses not structured to appear within those AI responses are invisible at the most critical stage of the customer journey.

Local and Professional Services

Solicitors, accountants, independent retailers, tradespeople, and hospitality businesses all depend on local search visibility. AI is now answering local intent queries with synthesised recommendations. A business not structured for AI citation does not appear in those recommendations, regardless of how long it has traded or how many positive reviews it holds.

contact an agent. Questions about local market conditions, average sale prices, and agent comparisons are precisely the queries AI Overviews are now answering. An agent without strong AI visibility loses consideration before a single conversation takes place.

B2B and Professional Advisory

Consultancies, technology suppliers, training providers, and financial services businesses face a particular challenge: AI platforms now conduct the initial research phase on behalf of potential clients, and the source that is cited becomes the default recommendation. The conversion advantage of AI-referred traffic makes this an urgent opportunity as much as a risk.

A Note on Readiness

Between the fourth quarter of 2024 and the second quarter of 2026, State of the Art Digital conducted OPTIMUM audits across businesses in UK automotive retail and residential estate agency. The findings were consistent, and concerning.

Assessed across seven dimensions of AI search visibility, the average readiness score was 5.5 out of 10. The majority of businesses scored below six in at least four of the seven dimensions. In no case had the business previously assessed its AI visibility in any structured form. The problem is not merely that businesses are unprepared. It is that most do not yet know they are unprepared.

"Half marks is not a crisis. It is, however, exactly what your most ambitious competitor is hoping you will settle for."

David Ogilvy.

SECTION 4: THE SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF AI VISIBILITY

The OPTIMUM Framework

The OPTIMUM framework was developed by State of the Art Digital to assess AI search readiness with the rigour and consistency of a professional audit. It does not rely on subjective judgement or aspirational benchmarks. Each of the seven dimensions is scored against specific, measurable criteria, and each score is supported by evidence gathered from the business's live digital presence.

What follows is a plain-language introduction to each dimension. The purpose is not to provide a self-assessment checklist but to allow business owners and marketing leaders to understand what is being evaluated, and why each dimension matters to the outcome.

A worked example. Take Entity and Brand Clarity. A score of 4/10 typically means the business name, address, and category appear inconsistently across the website, Google Business Profile, and directories, for example "Smith Motors" on the website but "Smith Motors Ltd" on one directory and "Smith's Garage" on another, with no schema markup tying the variants to a single entity. A score of 7/10 means the same name, category, and location data appear identically across every property, reinforced by an Organization schema block that names the entity explicitly. The gap between those two scores is not stylistic. It is the difference between an AI system being able to state with confidence who the business is, and an AI system encountering enough ambiguity that it cites a competitor instead.

#	Dimension	What it assesses and why it matters
01	Technical Foundation	Whether the technical infrastructure of the website permits AI crawlers and search systems to access, read, and index content reliably. A technically compromised site cannot be cited, regardless of the quality of its content.
02	Content Quality and E-E-A-T	Whether the content demonstrates real Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. AI systems are trained to surface authoritative sources. Content that lacks depth, specificity, or genuine expertise will be passed over in favour of sources that demonstrate it.
03	Entity and Brand Clarity	Whether AI systems can unambiguously identify what the business is, what it does, where it operates, and who it serves. Ambiguity at the entity level is one of the most common and most consequential failures found in OPTIMUM audits.
04	Topical Authority	Whether the business has established genuine authority over the topics most relevant to its sector and customer base. Depth of coverage across a coherent topic cluster is a strong predictor of AI citation.
05	Trust and Credibility Signals	Whether third-party signals, including reviews, press coverage, professional accreditations, and citations from authoritative sources, reinforce the business's credibility in the eyes of AI systems.
06	Structured Data and Machine Readability	Whether the website uses schema markup and structured data to communicate key information to machines in the precise format they require. This is the technical language AI systems use to understand businesses at scale.
07	Local and Contextual Relevance	Whether the business has established geographic and contextual relevance for the specific markets it serves. Local AI citations are increasingly the first point of contact between a potential customer and a business.

SECTION 5: AN ANONYMISED AUDIT SNAPSHOT

What an OPTIMUM Audit Reveals

The following is drawn from a real OPTIMUM audit conducted on a well-established UK business trading in a high-consideration consumer sector. All identifying details have been removed. The scores and findings are genuine. This business was not an outlier. It was, in every measurable respect, representative of the average.

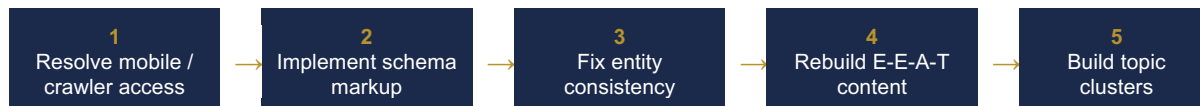
It had invested consistently in its website, maintained an active social media presence, and held a reasonable number of Google reviews. By conventional measures, it was digitally competent. By the measure of AI visibility, it was largely invisible.

Dimension	Score	Status	Key Finding
Technical Foundation	6 / 10	Mid	Site crawlable but slow on mobile. Render-blocking scripts inhibit AI crawler access to key service pages.
Content Quality / E-E-A-T	4 / 10	Low	Content generic and promotional in tone. No demonstration of genuine expertise. No named authors, credentials, or primary insight.
Entity and Brand Clarity	5 / 10	Mid	Business name, location, and trading category inconsistently presented across web properties and directories.
Topical Authority	4 / 10	Low	Thin coverage of sector-relevant topics. No content cluster structure. AI systems have insufficient signal to associate this business with its core subject matter.
Trust and Credibility Signals	7 / 10	Good	Reasonable volume of Google reviews. Listed on two relevant industry directories. No press coverage or third-party citations identified.
Structured Data / Machine Readability	3 / 10	Low	No schema markup implemented. Business type, opening hours, services, and geographic coverage not communicated in machine-readable format.
Local / Contextual Relevance	6 / 10	Mid	Google Business Profile present and accurate. No localised content strategy. Insufficient geographic signals for multi-location authority.

Overall OPTIMUM Score 5.0 / 10 <i>Below the 7/10 threshold OPTIMUM audit data associates with reliable AI citation across major platforms</i>	Priority Remediation Actions 6. Implement schema markup across all key pages (immediate) 7. Rebuild core service pages with E-E-A-T content architecture 8. Establish entity consistency across all directories and profiles 9. Develop a topic cluster strategy aligned to buyer intent queries
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10. Resolve mobile performance issues inhibiting crawler access

This business was not, by any reasonable standard, neglecting its digital presence. It was simply operating to rules that no longer fully apply. The remediation actions identified are not beyond reach, but they are sequential and interdependent: each step below establishes a precondition the next step depends on, which is why remediation cannot be reordered or run in parallel without loss of effect. That is precisely the gap OPTIMUM is designed to bridge.



Each stage depends on the one before it. Schema markup describing an entity that is not yet consistent simply encodes the inconsistency. Content rebuilt before entity clarity is fixed inherits the same ambiguity. This is why OPTIMUM remediation is sequenced, not simply prioritised.

SECTION 6: THE OPPORTUNITY

Being Cited Is Worth More Than Ranking

The businesses that adapt are not simply defending against loss. They are capturing a disproportionate share of a traffic stream that converts at rates significantly above traditional organic search.

Research from Seer Interactive found that brands cited within AI Overviews earn 35 per cent more organic clicks than competitors who are not cited. Semrush reports a 4.4 times lift in conversion rate from AI-referred traffic compared with standard organic visitors. Separate analysis from Ahrefs documented a 23 times conversion premium in a specific case study.

The reason is straightforward. A user who arrives at your website via an AI citation has already received an AI-validated endorsement of your authority on that subject. They arrive with a higher level of intent and trust than the average search visitor.

Brands cited in AI Overviews earn 35% more organic clicks than competitors who are not cited.

Seer Interactive, 2025.

There is also a structural point worth noting. The overlap between traditional Google rankings and AI citations is collapsing. By early 2026, between 62 and 83 per cent of AI citations were drawn from pages that do not rank in the top ten organic results. A business that invests in GEO optimisation now is building a separate channel of visibility that operates independently of traditional SEO ranking.

Domains with substantial brand mentions on Quora and Reddit have approximately four times higher AI citation probability. Presence on platforms such as Trustpilot and Yelp increases ChatGPT citation likelihood by three times compared with sites without such profiles. These are not abstract technical concerns. They are measurable advantages that can be built deliberately, with the right audit process and content strategy in place.

Generative AI traffic is growing 165 times faster than organic search traffic according to WebFX analysis published in June 2025. ChatGPT is now sending more referral traffic than Reddit and LinkedIn combined. The volume is still modest relative to Google's overall scale, but the trajectory is unambiguous.

SECTION 7: WHAT TO DO NEXT

From Comprehension to Action

Understanding the problem is necessary but not sufficient. The businesses that will benefit from the AI search transition are those that move from comprehension to action, and do so with a structured plan rather than a reactive series of tactical adjustments.

State of the Art Digital offers two engagement routes for businesses that wish to address their AI visibility with the seriousness the situation warrants.

Stage One: AI Risk Intelligence Briefing

A focused advisory in which we assess your current AI visibility exposure, identify the highest-priority gaps against the OPTIMUM framework, then present a clear picture of where your business stands relative to competitors in your sector. The briefing is the logical starting point for any business that has not yet assessed its AI readiness. This report produces a clear basis for informed decision-making.

Stage Two: Retained Advisory

Ongoing strategic advisory, typically commencing after the AI Risk Intelligence Briefing, in which we guide the implementation of OPTIMUM recommendations, monitor AI visibility performance, and adapt strategy as the platform landscape evolves. The retained relationship is structured around your business's specific sector, scale, and competitive context.

The question is not whether to act. The question is how long inaction will be affordable.

AI search is not a passing trend. ChatGPT more than doubled its weekly active users from 400 million to 900 million between February 2025 and February 2026. Google's AI Mode surpassed 1 billion monthly users by mid-2026, with query volume more than doubling each quarter. These are structural shifts in behaviour, and they compound. The businesses that establish AI visibility now will be increasingly difficult to displace. Those that defer will find the gap widening with every month.

State of the Art Digital was established to provide independent, expert guidance through exactly this kind of transition. The practice is built on four principles: experience accumulated across four decades of commercial marketing; intelligence gathered through continuous research into AI search behaviour; judgement applied without the conflicts of interest that characterise agency relationships; and independence from platform providers, tool vendors, and technology resellers.

Begin with a conversation

To discuss an AI Risk Intelligence Briefing for your business, contact Steve Coulter directly. steve@stevecoulter.co.uk +44 (0)7407 038877 stevecoulter.co.uk

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Part Two: Search Doomsday Is Q3 2027

Introduction

The way people find businesses online is changing faster than most businesses realise. The shift is not theoretical, and it is not coming at some indeterminate point in the future. It is measurable, it is accelerating, and the numbers tell a very clear story about what the next twelve months will look like for any business that relies on organic search traffic to generate enquiries.

This briefing sets out the current baseline, the trajectory through to December 2026, and the critical moment that research from Gartner, Semrush, Ahrefs, BrightEdge, and others converges on: the 40% inflection point, expected to arrive by the third quarter of 2027.

Understanding what that inflection point means, and why acting before it arrives is the only viable commercial strategy, is the central purpose of this report.

What Is AI Click Interception?

AI click interception describes the process by which AI-generated answers absorb the clicks that would previously have been directed to organic search results.

In the old model of search, a user typed a query, received a list of results, and clicked through to a website. The business that ranked well received the visit. In the model that now dominates an increasing proportion of searches, the user types a query and receives a synthesised answer directly on the results page, produced by Google's AI Overview. The question is answered before any click is made. The website that would have received the visit never sees the user.

That lost click is the unit of interception. At scale, across thousands of searches per month relevant to a given business, the accumulated loss of those clicks represents a structural and largely invisible erosion of top-of-funnel traffic.

What makes this particularly difficult to detect is that rankings do not change. A business can hold position one for its most important search terms and watch its website sessions fall by 20% or more over a few months, with nothing in Google Search Console to explain why. The cause is one layer above the results the dashboard is measuring.

KEY STATISTIC

A Pew Research Center analysis of the Google search behaviour of 900 US adults in March 2025, covering almost 70,000 searches, found that when an AI Overview is present, organic click-through rate falls from 15% to 8%. That is a reduction of nearly half in the proportion of searchers who ever reach a website. Separately, fewer than 1% of users clicked any of the cited links within the AI Overview itself.

Sources: Pew Research Center, July 2025; corroborated by Seer Interactive, September 2025 (25.1 million impressions across 42 organisations) and Ahrefs, December 2025 (300,000 keywords).

Where We Are Now: June 2026

The baseline figure for AI click interception as of the second quarter of 2026 stands at approximately 17%. This means that roughly one in six searches that would previously have delivered a visitor to a website are now being resolved on the search results page itself, without any outbound click.

That figure alone is significant enough to affect enquiry volumes for businesses in competitive informational categories. For automotive retail and estate agency, where the buyer journey almost always begins with research-led searches, the exposure is above average.

Google AI Overviews now appear on approximately 48-50% of US search queries, per Google's own February 2026 disclosure, corroborated by BrightEdge's industry tracker. For informational and long-tail queries, which account for the majority of pre-purchase research behaviour, that coverage sits at the higher end of the range and is growing fast. The click-through rate suppression those Overviews cause is therefore not a marginal concern for a small subset of searches. It is the dominant dynamic across the most commercially valuable part of the search landscape.

Traffic arriving from external AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Claude is growing fast, but from a very low base. Conductor's 2026 AEO/GEO Benchmarks Report, analysing 3.3 billion sessions across 13,770 enterprise domains, found that AI referral traffic accounted for just 1.08% of total website traffic on average. The more significant disruption is happening inside Google itself, through AI Overviews and AI Mode, where attribution is largely invisible and the volume is enormous.

THE ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM

Most businesses will not see this damage clearly in their analytics. Google's June 2026 Search Console update introduced dedicated AI Overview impression reports, and GA4 now carries a native AI Assistant channel that identifies referral traffic from platforms such as ChatGPT and Claude. These are genuine steps forward. But they solve only part of the problem.

The Search Console reports show impressions only. There is no click data, no click-through rate, and no query-level breakdown. A business can see that its content appeared inside an AI Overview 4,000 times in a month and have no way of knowing how many people, if any, clicked through as a result.

The GA4 AI Assistant channel captures identifiable referrals from external AI platforms, but AI Overviews within Google Search are still attributed to Organic Search, indistinguishable from a standard blue-link click. And when a user reads an AI-generated answer and does not click anything, no analytics platform receives any signal at all.

The core disconnect therefore remains. Rankings stay stable. Sessions fall. The gap between the two, invisible in most dashboards, is still the signature of AI click interception. The new tools illuminate one edge of the problem. They do not yet measure it.

The Trajectory to December 2026

The six months between now and the end of 2026 represent the period in which the current trend consolidates into something harder to reverse. Three parallel developments will drive the numbers upward.

AI Overview Coverage Will Expand

Google AI Overviews currently appear on approximately 48-50% of US search queries, per Google's own disclosure. Third-party trackers vary below that figure depending on methodology and query mix, and coverage has moved unevenly through 2025 and into 2026 rather than climbing in a straight line. On the balance of the available tracking data, this figure is projected to approach 60% by the end of the year. Every percentage point of additional coverage extends the suppression of organic click-through rate across a wider pool of queries.

The Measured Trend Is Already Converging

In February 2024, Gartner issued a forecast that traditional search engine volume would decline by 25% by 2026, as AI chatbots and virtual agents absorbed an increasing share of queries. Gartner framed the figure as scenario modelling rather than a definitive prediction, and by mid-2026 the literal volume decline it described has not clearly materialised: Google has held over 90% search market share through the period. What has materialised, and is independently measurable without reference to that forecast, is the underlying behavioural shift Gartner was pointing at. AI Overview expansion, rising zero-click behaviour, and the growth of AI-native search platforms are converging on the same window Gartner flagged, even though the specific volume figure has proved harder to verify than the trend itself.

Zero-Click Behaviour Will Become the Default

Zero-click searches, those that end without any outbound click, already account for approximately 68% of all Google searches (SparkToro, 2026, Similarweb desktop/mobile panel, January to April 2026), up from 60% in the 2024 Datos study. In Google's full AI Mode, which replaces the traditional results interface with a conversational AI response, that figure rises to 93% of searches ending without a click to any external website (Semrush, September 2025, based on 69 million search sessions). As AI Mode rolls out more broadly and AI Overviews expand their coverage, the proportion of searches that resolve entirely within the results page will continue to increase.

**DECEMBER
2026
PROJECTION**

AI click interception is projected to reach 25-30% of organic clicks by December 2026. One in four searches that should be driving traffic to your website will instead be resolved by an AI-generated answer. The trajectory of AIO coverage and zero-click behaviour, both measured through the first half of 2026, places the underlying trend Gartner identified in 2024 within this window, even where the specific 25% volume figure has been harder to verify directly.

The 40% Inflection Point: Q3 2027

The single most important number in this report is 40%. It represents the threshold at which AI interception of organic clicks stops being a channel-level disruption and becomes the defining strategic reality of digital visibility.

Below 40%, businesses can reasonably defend their position through a combination of traditional search engine optimisation and emerging Generative Engine Optimisation activity. The damage is real, but it can be managed within existing frameworks. At 40%, the equation changes.

Semrush's modelling, published in June 2025 and drawing on analysis of over 500 high-value topics, projects that AI search channels will deliver economic value equivalent to traditional organic search by the end of 2027. Digital Applied's quarterly outlook work for 2026 frames the convergence of these trends in terms of scenario-weighted trajectories. On the central scenario, the 40% interception threshold arrives at Q3 2027. The aggressive scenario places it as early as Q2 2027. The conservative scenario allows for Q2 2028. **The central estimate is Q3 2027, approximately 12 to 15 months from now.**

What Drives the Curve

The evidence points to five variables that determine how quickly the 40% threshold is reached. Three are already moving in the direction that accelerates arrival.

The first is AI Overview query coverage. This is the single largest lever. If AIO coverage continues its rate of expansion toward 70% or beyond by the end of 2026, the trajectory is consistent with the 40% interception threshold arriving in mid-2027.

The second is the monthly active user growth of AI-native search platforms. ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Microsoft Copilot are all expanding their user bases at rates that compound quarterly. ChatGPT reached 900 million weekly active users by February 2026, more than double the figure from a year earlier (OpenAI, February 2026). Google's own AI Mode surpassed 1 billion monthly users by mid-2026, with query volume more than doubling each quarter (Google, I/O 2026).

The third is the evolution of transactional query handling. AI systems currently intercept informational queries at a significantly higher rate than transactional queries. As AI engines improve their ability to handle product comparison, availability, and pricing queries, the transactional interception rate will increase, drawing the aggregate 40% threshold forward.

What the Inflection Point Actually Means

The 40% threshold matters because it represents a structural inversion in how digital visibility works. For the past 25 years, the central question for any business with an online presence has been: how do we rank well on Google? Ranking determined visibility. Visibility determined traffic. Traffic determined enquiries.

At 40% interception, that chain breaks. A business can rank first for every term that matters to its customers and still lose nearly half the traffic those rankings should deliver, because the AI layer intercepts the click before it is made.

The new question is not "do we rank?" but "do we get cited?" A business that ranks first but is not cited in the AI Overview gets far less traffic than it should. A business that ranks lower but is consistently cited in the AI response gets traffic that converts at a substantially higher rate. Semrush's research found that AI-referred visitors convert at 4.4 times the rate of standard organic visitors, because those visitors arrive already informed, already comparing, and already closer to a decision.

Semrush projects that by the end of 2027, AI search channels will deliver equivalent economic value to traditional organic search globally, despite representing a smaller proportion of raw traffic volume. The conversion premium is large enough to compensate for the volume shortfall, provided a business is cited. For businesses that are not cited, the compounding loss of both traffic and conversion quality represents a serious commercial risk.

THE WINDOW IS OPEN NOW. IT WILL NOT STAY OPEN.

Competition for AI citation positions is currently low. Businesses that build citation readiness in the next six months will establish positions that are significantly harder to displace once the market catches up. By Q3 2027, when 40% interception arrives, the citation landscape will be far more contested. First-mover advantage in GEO is real, measurable, and time-limited.

The businesses that act in the June to December 2026 window are the ones best placed to absorb the inflection point with their visibility intact.

Projection Summary

The table below summarises the key metrics across the three timeframes covered in this report.

Timeframe	AI Click Interception	AIO Coverage of SERPs	Economic Value Position
Now (June 2026)	~17%	~48-50%	AI-referred visitors convert at 4.4x the rate of standard organic (Semrush, 2025)
December 2026	~25-30%	Approaching 60%	Zero-click rate continuing to climb past 68%, consistent with the trend Gartner's 2024 forecast pointed toward
Mid-2027 (INFLECTION)	~40%	Potentially 70%+	AI and organic of near-equal economic weight globally (Semrush projection)

What This Means in Practice

For a car dealership or estate agency whose enquiry pipeline begins with search, the numbers above translate into a concrete sequence of events over the next 12 to 15 months.

Today, approximately one in six of the searches that should be sending prospects to your website are being resolved without a click. Your rankings look fine. Your visibility inside the AI layer is unmeasured and, in most cases, unmanaged.

By December 2026, that ratio will be closer to one in four. The Gartner threshold for traditional search volume decline will have been reached. Businesses that have not begun building citation authority inside AI systems will be losing a quarter of their potential organic traffic to AI Overviews that do not feature them.

By Q3 2027, the inflection arrives. Four in ten searches are resolved before a click is made. The businesses cited in those AI responses are capturing high-intent, high-converting visitors. The businesses that are not cited are receiving the remainder: a diminishing and lower-quality pool of traffic drawn from the queries AI systems did not resolve.

The strategic case for acting now rather than at the inflection point is straightforward. Citation authority in AI systems is built incrementally, through structured content, entity recognition, topical depth, and technical readiness. It cannot be purchased quickly once the competitive pressure arrives. The businesses that establish it in the current window, while the competition for citation positions remains relatively low, will hold an advantage that compounds as the market shifts around them.

The inflection point is not a warning about a distant future. It is a fixed destination on a trajectory that is already well under way. The only variable is whether your business is positioned to benefit from it or exposed by it.

Part Three: The Chaff Effect

Introduction

Most commentary on AI search disruption focuses on a single number: the percentage of searches that AI now intercepts before a click happens. That number matters, and this report sets it out in full. But on its own, it tells only half the story, and arguably the less important half.

The number that actually determines what happens to a business's enquiry pipeline is not how many clicks disappear. It is what kind of clicks remain. AI systems do not intercept search traffic evenly. They intercept the easy, well-defined, informational searches first, because those are the ones a synthesised answer can resolve cleanly. What survives is disproportionately made up of the searches AI finds hardest to answer: ambiguous, early-stage, undecided. The residual pool is not a smaller version of the old audience. It is a different, lower-intent audience.

“Residual pool”, used throughout this report, means the proportion of search traffic that survives AI interception and still results in a click. A full definition appears in the Dictionary of Terms at the back of this report.

This briefing sets out why that distinction matters more than any single threshold, what the data shows about how the pool is shrinking and skewing at the same time, and what it means for any business that still measures search performance by counting clicks rather than understanding who is left clicking.

Zero-Click Rate: Informational	Zero-Click Rate: Transactional	Interception Threshold (Central Estimate)
74%	31%	40%, Q3 2027

The Mechanism: Why the Pool Shrinks and Sours Together

AI click interception describes the process by which AI-generated answers absorb the clicks that would previously have gone to organic search results. The user types a query, receives a synthesised answer directly on the page, and never reaches a website. Most analysis of this trend treats it as a single uniform decline, as though every type of search were being intercepted at the same rate.

That is not what the data shows. AI systems are far better at answering some questions than others, and the gap is wide.

Query Type	Zero-Click Rate	What This Means
Informational (“what is”, “how does”, “best way to”)	74%	Resolved by AI before a click is ever considered. This is the bulk of early-stage research.

Query Type	Zero-Click Rate	What This Means
Commercial investigation (comparing options)	39%	Comparison queries survive at a materially higher rate, but still skew toward AI synthesis.
Transactional (“buy”, “quote”, “book”, “near me”)	31%	The clicks that survive best. Ready-to-act buyers still click through.

Informational queries, the broad early-stage research questions that begin most buyer journeys, are resolved without a click 74% of the time. Transactional queries, where someone is ready to buy, book, or request a quote, see a zero-click rate of only 31% (Semrush Intent Study, corroborated by SparkToro/Datos clickstream data). The gap between those two figures is the entire story.

AI Overviews are not intercepting search traffic at random. They are intercepting the front end of the buyer journey and leaving the back end relatively intact. BrightEdge’s analysis of Google AI Overviews confirms this pattern directly: informational intent accounts for 71% of cited volume, while transactional intent remains the smallest category at just 2% to 3%. A separate industry review of over one million queries found that 96.5% of those triggering AI Overviews were informational in nature.

TWO RELATED BUT DISTINCT MEASURES

The 71% and 96.5% figures above describe what gets cited within AI Overviews - the composition of the content AI draws on to build its answers. The 74%/39%/31% figures in the table describe zero-click rate - the share of searches of each type that end without an outbound click at all. These are two different measurements of the same underlying pattern, not the same statistic restated. Citation composition tells you what AI is reading. Zero-click rate tells you what the searcher does next. Both point the same direction, which is why they are presented together, but they should not be read as interchangeable.

This is not a flaw in the system. It is exactly what you would expect. A simple factual or comparative question is easy for an AI model to answer with confidence in a paragraph. A complex, personal, undecided question, the kind a prospective car buyer or house buyer is often still working through, is much harder to resolve cleanly. AI systems are built to answer the questions they can answer well. The questions they cannot answer well are precisely the ones that still send a human to a website.

Why This Matters More Than a Single Threshold

If AI interception simply reduced traffic by a fixed percentage across the board, the commercial response would be straightforward: work harder to compensate for a smaller pool using the same playbook that worked before. That is not what is happening.

As interception climbs, two things happen simultaneously. The pool of clicks available to a business shrinks in raw volume. And the composition of that pool shifts, because the queries being intercepted are concentrated in the highest-volume, most accessible part of the buyer journey: the early, informational stage where most search volume actually sits.

The result is non-linear. A business does not simply lose a proportion of its traffic and keep the rest unchanged. It loses the volume first from its top-of-funnel, broad-reach searches, the ones that built awareness and brought in browsers who later became buyers. What remains is concentrated in late-stage, transactional searches: smaller in number, but still converting because those are the buyers AI cannot fully resolve on their behalf. The business is not just losing the good half of what it had. It is losing the half that used to feed the other half.

STATE OF THE ART DIGITAL PROJECTION - NOT A CITED FIGURE

The Compounding Effect

A straight-line reading of interception data suggests that going from 17% to 40% roughly doubles the damage. Our reading of the residual pool data is that the damage is likely to compound faster than that, because the clicks lost first are disproportionately the awareness-stage searches that feed the funnel. If that holds, losing the top of the funnel would eventually run the bottom dry too, even where transactional click-through rates appear stable in isolation, which would mean a business could watch its transactional traffic hold steady for months while its overall enquiry pipeline quietly collapses upstream. This is our extrapolation from the query-type data, not a pattern we have yet observed directly in longitudinal client data; confirming it would require tracking a business's informational and transactional traffic separately over several quarters. Until then, it should be treated as the most plausible reading of the mechanism, not as a demonstrated result.

This is State of the Art Digital's interpretation of the relationship between the cited interception figures, not a separately published statistic. No external source has measured "compounding" directly; the reasoning is our own, built from the sourced query-type data above.

Where We Are Now: June 2026

The current baseline for AI click interception, across all query types, stands at approximately 17%. That blended figure conceals the divergence already under way. Informational searches are being intercepted at a far higher rate than that average suggests, while transactional searches remain comparatively resilient.

Google AI Overviews now appear on approximately 48–50% of US search queries, per Google's own February 2026 disclosure, corroborated by BrightEdge's industry tracker (48% as of February 2026, up from 31% twelve months earlier). Third-party estimates vary below that figure depending on methodology and query mix: Conductor's broader, less informational-weighted benchmark puts coverage closer to 25%. For the broad, exploratory queries that dominate early-stage research in both automotive retail and estate agency, coverage sits at the higher end of that range and is growing fast.

Traffic arriving from external AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Claude is growing quickly but remains small in absolute terms. Conductor's 2026 AEO/GEO Benchmarks Report, analysing 3.3 billion sessions across 13,770 enterprise domains, found AI referral traffic at just 1.08% of total website traffic on average. The more significant disruption is happening inside

Google itself, through AI Overviews, and it is happening unevenly across the buyer journey rather than evenly across all search types.

THE ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM

Most businesses will not see this shift clearly in their analytics, because the standard dashboards measure volume, not composition. Google's June 2026 Search Console update introduced dedicated AI Overview impression reports, and GA4 now carries a native AI Assistant channel for external platform referrals. Both are genuine improvements.

But neither tool tells a business which segment of its traffic is disappearing. A dealership might see overall sessions fall by 15% and conclude the damage is evenly spread, when in reality it has lost a third of its informational, top-of-funnel visitors while its transactional traffic has barely moved. That distinction changes the diagnosis entirely, and most reporting tools are not built to surface it.

The Trajectory to December 2026

Over the next six months, three developments will widen the gap between the shrinking informational pool and the comparatively stable transactional pool.

AI Overview Coverage Will Expand Into More Query Types

AIO coverage is projected to approach 60% of search results pages by the end of 2026, rebased from Google's own confirmed 48-50% baseline and reflecting the more measured expansion observed through the first half of 2026. As coverage expands, it is increasingly reaching into commercial investigation queries, the comparison-stage searches that currently survive at 39%. That is the segment most likely to see the steepest decline through the rest of the year.

The Measured Trend Is Already Converging

In February 2024, Gartner forecast that traditional search engine volume would decline by 25% by 2026, as AI chatbots and virtual agents absorbed an increasing share of queries. Gartner framed this explicitly as scenario modelling rather than a fixed prediction, and by mid-2026 the literal volume decline it described has not clearly materialised: Google has held over 90% search market share through the period. What has materialised, independently of that forecast, is the underlying behavioural shift Gartner was pointing at. AI Overview expansion and rising zero-click behaviour are converging on the same window Gartner flagged, even though the specific 25% volume figure has proved harder to verify than the trend itself, a judgement we make as our own reading of the measured data, not as a restatement of Gartner's forecast.

Zero-Click Behaviour Will Continue to Concentrate at the Top of the Funnel

Zero-click searches overall have already reached approximately 68% of all Google searches (SparkToro, 2026, Similarweb desktop/mobile panel, January–April 2026), up from 60% in the 2024 Datos study this report previously cited as its baseline. Within Google's full AI Mode, which

replaces the standard results interface with a conversational response, that figure reaches 93% (Semrush, September 2025, based on 69 million search sessions). The expansion of AI Mode and AI Overviews will continue to fall hardest on the informational searches that already make up the bulk of zero-click behaviour, accelerating the skew toward a smaller, more transactional residual pool.

STATE OF THE ART DIGITAL PROJECTION - NOT A CITED FIGURE

December 2026 Projection

AI click interception is projected to reach 25–30% of organic clicks by December 2026, but the composition shift will be more pronounced than the headline figure suggests. Informational searches will be approaching 80% zero-click, while transactional searches remain closer to 35%. A business measuring only total traffic will see a concerning but manageable decline. A business measuring the funnel by stage will see its top-of-funnel reach eroding far faster than its conversion-stage traffic, which is the earlier and more useful warning sign.

These specific percentages (25–30% blended, ~80% informational, ~35% transactional) are State of the Art Digital's extrapolation from the cited Semrush, BrightEdge, and Conductor data and the current 17% baseline. They are not independently published forecasts and should be read as informed modelling, not as a statistic with its own external citation.

The 40% Threshold: A Planning Marker, Not the Mechanism

The figure most often used to describe this trend is 40%, the point at which AI interception of organic clicks is projected to reach a critical mass. Research from Gartner, Semrush, and BrightEdge converges on a central estimate of Q3 2027 for this threshold, with an aggressive scenario of Q2 2027 and a conservative scenario extending to Q2 2028.

It is worth being precise about what that number is and is not. It is not the point at which AI search becomes more commercially viable than organic search in some abstract sense.

A NOTE ON THE 4.4X CONVERSION FIGURE

Semrush (June 2025) reports that AI-referred visitors convert at 4.4 times the rate of standard organic visitors, at the current 17% interception rate. This figure is genuinely useful but it needs a caveat that the original Semrush release does not foreground, and that this report did not foreground clearly enough in its first edition either.

AI-referred visitors are not a random sample of search traffic. By the nature of how they arrive (clicking through from an AI-generated citation rather than a standard organic result) they are disproportionately drawn from the later, more decided stage of the buyer journey, the same transactional segment this report has already shown converts better regardless of channel. Comparing their conversion rate to all organic visitors, which includes the broad informational traffic still dominant in that pool, is not a like-for-like comparison. It compares a pre-filtered, high-intent group to an unfiltered one.

This does not mean the 4.4x figure is wrong or unusable. It means it should be read as broadly consistent with this report's central argument, that transactional, late-stage intent converts better than early-stage browsing, rather than as independent proof that AI referral as a channel carries some special conversion premium of its own. The honest claim is narrower than the headline number suggests: the conversion premium associated with late-stage intent already exists, and AI referral traffic happens to be concentrated in that segment. Whether AI-cited visitors convert better than organic visitors at the *same* stage of intent is a comparison the available data does not yet support, and would require a study that controls for query intent rather than channel alone.

What 40% actually represents is the point at which the residual pool argument becomes impossible to ignore. Below that level, a business can reasonably tell itself that overall traffic decline is manageable, and that steady rankings will eventually translate into steady enquiries. At 40%, with informational interception likely well above that figure and transactional interception still meaningfully lower, the gap between the two becomes too wide to paper over. The number is useful chiefly as a trigger for decision-makers who need a concrete line in the sand rather than a trend line. The underlying mechanism, the compounding loss of the funnel's feeder traffic, is already operating today and does not wait for a round number to arrive.

THE WINDOW IS OPEN NOW. IT WILL NOT STAY OPEN.

Competition for AI citation positions, particularly in the informational, awareness-stage content that AI currently intercepts most heavily, is low. Businesses that build citation readiness in that segment over the next six months will hold positions that are far harder to displace once the wider market catches up. By the time the 40% threshold arrives, the citation landscape for informational content will be significantly more contested.

The businesses that act in the June to December 2026 window are the ones best placed to keep feeding their transactional funnel once the informational pool has largely dried up.

What This Means In Practice

For a car dealership, estate agency or professional service, this distinction changes how the problem should be measured and acted on.

Today, broad research-stage searches, the kind a prospective buyer makes long before they are ready to enquire, are already being resolved by AI roughly three times out of four. Your transactional traffic, people actively searching to buy, book a viewing, or request a quote, is holding up far better, intercepted only around three times out of ten. If you are only watching total session counts, this divergence is invisible. The transactional traffic masks the collapse happening upstream.

By December 2026, that gap widens further, on the trajectory set out above. The informational pool that used to introduce prospects to your business early in their journey will be smaller and harder to reach through traditional content alone. The transactional pool will still be there, but it will increasingly be filled by people who found you through an AI citation rather than a search result, because the businesses cited in AI answers are the ones still visible at the point where the funnel begins.

By Q3 2027, the inflection point arrives as a planning marker rather than a sudden event. The businesses that have spent the preceding 12 to 15 months building citation authority in the informational, top-of-funnel content that AI now dominates will have a transactional pool still being fed. The businesses that have not will be competing for an increasingly thin, increasingly contested slice of late-stage, ready-to-buy traffic, with no upstream pipeline replenishing it.

The strategic case for acting now is built on the mechanism, not the threshold. Citation authority in AI systems, particularly for the broad informational content that AI currently intercepts most aggressively, is built incrementally, through structured content, entity recognition, and topical depth. It cannot be assembled quickly once the funnel has already run dry. The businesses that establish it in the current window will hold an advantage that compounds as the residual pool continues to shrink and skew around them.

A STARTING DIAGNOSTIC

Before any strategic response, the most useful first step is a direct comparison rather than a single number. Pull your Search Console AI Overview impression report alongside your GA4 AI Assistant channel data and your standard organic sessions, then split that view by query stage where your analytics allow it (broad/informational versus comparison versus transactional). The question is not whether overall traffic has fallen. It is whether informational and transactional traffic are moving in the same direction at the same rate. If they are diverging, in line with the pattern set out in this report, the diagnosis is upstream funnel erosion rather than a general decline, and the response should be built accordingly.

Dictionary of Terms

The following definitions are provided for readers who are encountering the terminology of AI search for the first time, consolidated from all three parts of this study.

Term	Definition
AEO (Answer Engine Optimisation)	The practice of structuring content to be surfaced by AI answer engines, including ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's AI features, rather than merely to rank in traditional search results.
AI Click Interception	The process by which AI-generated search answers absorb clicks that would previously have been directed to organic search results. A business can rank first for a search term and still lose the visitor because the AI layer answers the question before any click is made.
AI Mode	Google's fully conversational search interface, launched in 2025, in which users can ask follow-up questions and receive extended AI-generated responses. In AI Mode, 93% of searches end without an outbound click to any website (Semrush, September 2025).
AI Overview (AIO)	The AI-generated summary block that appears at the top of a Google search results page, above the standard ranked links. It synthesises information from multiple sources and answers the query directly on the page. When an AI Overview is present, the majority of users do not click through to any website.
Citation	A reference to a specific website or piece of content within an AI-generated answer. Being cited in an AI Overview or AI Mode response is the equivalent of ranking well in traditional search: it determines whether a business is visible to users who never look beyond the AI answer.
Click-Through Rate (CTR)	The percentage of users who see a search result and click on it. Traditional organic CTR averages around 15% for a first-position result. When an AI Overview is present, CTR falls to approximately 8%, a reduction of nearly half (Pew Research Center, July 2025).
E-E-A-T	Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. Google's framework for assessing content quality, now a critical factor in AI citation decisions across all major platforms.
Entity	In the context of AI and search, an entity is a clearly defined, unambiguous thing: a business, a person, a place, a product. AI systems reason about entities rather than keywords.
GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation)	The emerging discipline of optimising content and digital presence for inclusion in AI-generated answers. GEO extends and, in some respects, supersedes traditional SEO practice.
Inflection Point	The threshold at which a trend produces a qualitative change in outcomes, not merely a quantitative one. In this report, the 40% inflection point refers to the moment at which AI click interception reaches a level where traditional SEO alone can no longer sustain enquiry volumes, regardless of ranking position.
Informational Intent	The broad, early-stage research questions that begin most buyer journeys, such as "what is the average cost of" or "how does X work". These queries are intercepted by AI at the highest rate, around 74% zero-click.
OPTIMUM	State of the Art Digital's proprietary seven-dimension audit framework for assessing and improving a business's visibility across both

	traditional search and AI-generated search results. Current version: v2.3.
Organic Search	Website traffic that arrives from unpaid search engine results, as distinct from paid advertising. Organic search has been the primary source of top-of-funnel digital visibility for most businesses since the late 1990s. AI Overviews and AI Mode are now systematically reducing the volume of clicks that organic rankings deliver.
Residual Pool	The proportion of search traffic that survives AI interception and still results in a click. The central insight of this report is that the residual pool is not a smaller version of the original audience, but a structurally different one, skewed toward later-stage, more transactional intent.
Schema Markup	Structured code, typically in JSON-LD format, that communicates information about a business to search engines and AI systems in a machine-readable format. Absence of schema markup is one of the most common findings in OPTIMUM audits.
Search Console	Google's free tool for website owners, which reports on how a site appears in Google Search. As of June 2026, Search Console includes dedicated reports for AI Overview and AI Mode impressions, though click data for these features remains unavailable.
SEO (Search Engine Optimisation)	The established practice of improving a website's visibility in traditional search engine results. SEO remains relevant but must now be practised alongside GEO and AEO strategies.
SERP	Search Engine Results Page. The page a user sees after submitting a query to a search engine. The traditional SERP consisted primarily of ranked blue links. The modern SERP is increasingly led by AI-generated content, with ranked links pushed further down the page or displaced entirely.
Topical Authority	A measure of how comprehensively and consistently a business addresses the topics most relevant to its sector. AI systems favour sources that demonstrate depth of knowledge over a coherent subject area.
Transactional Intent	Late-stage, ready-to-act searches such as “buy”, “book”, “quote”, or “near me”. These queries are intercepted by AI at a comparatively low rate, around 31% zero-click, because AI cannot complete the transaction on the user's behalf.
Zero-Click Search	A search that ends without the user clicking through to any website. Zero-click behaviour occurs when the search results page itself provides a sufficient answer through an AI Overview, featured snippet, or knowledge panel. Zero-click searches account for approximately 68% of all Google searches overall (SparkToro, 2026), rising to 93% within AI Mode (Semrush, September 2025).

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State of the Art Digital and OPTIMUM Proprietary Data

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About State of the Art Digital

State of the Art Digital is an independent AI search and GEO consultancy led by Steve Coulter, a sales and marketing strategist with four decades of experience across automotive retail, finance, and consumer sectors. The practice specialises in AI visibility strategy, OPTIMUM auditing, and retained advisory for businesses in automotive, estate agency, and UK SME markets.

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