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instant answers
and discovery

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contents

Written on behalf of the
IAB Australia Future of Search Working Group

anne tran
performance & tech lead admatic anz

gregory cattelain
national head of biddable media spark foundry

bonnie dodemaide
head of digital iProspect

what are instant answers and search?

Since Google's Knowledge Graph launched in 2012 until the modern day with AI Mode introduced by Google in Australia early this October, the search industry has consistently been defined by one goal: reducing friction between user questions and answers. That evolution has culminated in what we now call instant answers or zero-click search - when a user's query is resolved directly on the results page without any click-through to a website.

Today, this model increasingly shapes search behaviour. The introduction of AI-generated answers has accelerated this trend. Microsoft integrated GPT-4 into Bing's search interface in early 2023, while Google rolled out its Search Generative Experience (SGE) later that year (Search Engine Land). These tools synthesise information from multiple sources and deliver conversational answers directly on the search page, reducing the need to click through at all.

Rapid escalation highlights a fundamental reality: AI-assisted answers and emerging search agents are compressing the journey between question and satisfaction faster than ever before. Users are no longer simply navigating through links - they are conversing with engines that anticipate, synthesise, and deliver results in a single, closed loop.

While clicks may be fewer in cases across some verticals, and the frameworks to measure their impact are still evolving, emerging research suggests that clicks following AI-driven instant answers can carry deeper intent and richer context. These new search experiences are designed to absorb much of the discovery that previously showed up as traffic metrics without meaningful subsequent engagement. The economics of these changes in search traffic flow will vary by sector and organisation type; for example, publishers that rely on page views to create ad inventory are likely to feel more downward pressure, at least in the short term.

This paper is intended to provide context and guidance primarily for brand marketers and agencies as they navigate these discovery changes.

instant answers and zero click frameworks

With changes to the way that people find information and answers through search, it is critical that brands and marketers understand the recommended frameworks from Google & Microsoft to help create website content that will attract visibility in the modern search engine results pages.

Google & Microsoft both have different recommended frameworks, however, the underlying principles within them are the same with a key focus on:

> ***Transparency & Structure*** **- content should be clearly outlaid using features like Schema.org so AI models can reliably read, understand, and use the information to generate accurate instant answers.**

> ***Trust & Reliability*** **- through strong site authority and clear content purpose, content can be validated by both AI models and human users as the definitive and most accurate source for instant answers.**

> ***Future Proofed for Agentic Web*** **- both the Google and Microsoft frameworks future-proof content for the AI-driven "Agentic Web" by requiring either inherent content quality or a direct technical interface so that the material can be reliably utilised and interacted with by autonomous AI agents.**

To fully capitalise on these shifts, it is essential to explore these unique frameworks developed by Google and Microsoft. While their underlying principles align, their approaches offer distinct methods for optimising websites. These specific guidelines, Google's focus on content quality and credibility, and Microsoft's on technical enablement, define the roadmap for content success in the AI era.

Google = E-E-A-T Framework

E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness) is Google's quality framework designed to help their automated ranking systems identify the most helpful and reliable content. While E-E-A-T itself isn't a specific ranking factor [1], using a mix of factors that can identify content with good E-E-A-T is useful.

> ***E (Experience):*** Demonstrates first-hand involvement with the subject matter, showing direct evidence or practical knowledge rather than just theoretical information.

> ***E (Expertise):*** Reflects deep knowledge or high skill in the topic, typically shown by having content created or reviewed by qualified specialists.

> ***A (Authoritativeness):*** Relates to the overall reputation and standing of the creator or website as a recognized source in the field, often evidenced by industry citations or strong public recognition.

> ***T (Trustworthiness):*** Represents the accuracy, integrity, and safety of the information and the site itself, supported by factors like clear policies, transparency, and factual correctness.

To optimize content, Google advises creators to evaluate their material using the "Who, How, and Why" approach [1]

> ***Who Created the Content:*** It must be evident to visitors who authored the content. Adding accurate authorship information like bylines that link to further information about the author's background ensures the content aligns with the concepts of Expertise and Authoritativeness.

> ***How the Content Was Created:*** Transparency is key. This involves explaining the process, such as detailing how products were tested or the number of items reviewed. For content involving automation, creators must disclose the use of AI or automation and provide background on why and how the technology was utilised, ensuring the process doesn't undermine user trust.

> ***Why the Content Was Created:*** The primary motivation must be to genuinely help people, not merely to attract search traffic. Content created solely to manipulate search rankings is a violation of Google's spam policies.

Content with strong E-E-A-T is inherently seen as high-quality and reliable, making it the preferred source for Featured Snippets, Knowledge Panels, and the foundation for AI-generated answers.

[1] (Source: Google Search Console)

Microsoft = NLWeb Framework

NLWeb (Natural Language Web) is an open-source framework introduced by Microsoft to help brands turn any website into an AI-powered app, allowing users (and AI agents) to query the content directly in natural language. Instead of expecting users to navigate menus and pages, the site itself can answer questions, perform searches, or carry on a dialog.

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How NLWeb works

NLWeb acts as a lightweight layer on top of a website's existing content:

> ***Schema.org as Fuel:*** Many websites are already leveraging semi-structured data such as Schema.org markups, RSS feeds, JSON-LD etc. NLWeb bootstraps AI interfaces using the data that is already available to make it easier for AI to read and scrape websites.

> ***Small Footprint, Big Impact:*** Implementing NLWeb is intentionally lightweight with just a small piece of JavaScript paired with optional customisation. Once implemented, NLWeb then automatically uses the site's structured data and an LLM backend to understand and answer queries about the site.

> ***Model-Agnostic & Open:*** Importantly, NLWeb is open and model-agnostic. It's not tied to a specific Microsoft engine and supports major AI models + all search engines. Each NLWeb instance also functions as a Model Context Protocol (MCP) server which is becoming an emerging standard for AI agents to discover and interact with web content.

By democratising natural language interfaces, NLWeb allows websites to act as AI agents that deliver answers directly from the source to users, voice assistants, and search engines. This function may help retain publisher traffic and content by helping it be available in a structured, controllable way.

sometimes, less does more

Emerging data across both Google and Microsoft ecosystems reveals a crucial insight: the traffic that does reach websites today tends to be significantly higher in intent, engagement, and conversion value. In other words, the age of AI-driven search should not be defined by loss of traffic opportunity, but increasingly by the concentration and quality of it.

Quality Over Quantity

According to Google's Search Central and developer documentation, clicks originating from AI Overview pages can be more valuable than those from traditional search listings. Google's May 2025 Search Quality Evaluation found that sessions originating from AI Overview clicks are 32% longer and 21% more likely to convert than traditional organic visits. When users click after viewing an AI-generated answer, they spend longer time on-site, engage with more content, and are more likely to convert. Google refers to these as "higher-quality clicks", a term that signals deeper intent and higher satisfaction (Google Developers). According to Google's August 2025 blog post, the rise of AI-driven search interfaces (such as AI Overviews and AI Mode) prompts users to ask longer, more complex questions and can present a richer set of links and options on the page to engage further on sites. (Google The Keyword Blog)

Microsoft's complementary research echoes this, noting that AI-mediated queries drive higher satisfaction and post-click depth across sectors such as retail and finance. In its 2025 Zero-UI report, Microsoft observed that users increasingly rely on AI and voice-powered interfaces for instant answers, but when they do click through, it's typically for in-depth exploration or purchase decisions. (Microsoft Advertising Blog).

Brand Visibility Without the Click

Well-known industry analysts such as Rand Fishkin have reframed zero-click visibility as a branding opportunity. Appearing in featured snippets or AI citations builds familiarity and trust, even when no immediate visit occurs. Fishkin calls this the "seen vs. chosen" effect - comparable to brand impressions in traditional advertising (Search Engine Land).

Being quoted in an AI summary or attributed in a snippet is, effectively, a digital billboard moment. Users may not click then, but they register the brand as authoritative, influencing future consideration.

For publishers, this kind of "seen vs. chosen" exposure may never fully substitute for monetisable visits, but it can still play a role in reinforcing brand authority, supporting direct traffic, and strengthening the case for inclusion in future AI-driven experiences.

The "Intent Compression" Effect

As simple questions are increasingly answered on the results page, users now engage later in the decision process. Bain & Company observed that generative AI compresses multi-step discovery journeys into concise, high-intent interactions (Bain & Company). Google's own internal data corroborates this, noting that AI Overviews expose users to a more diverse set of sources for complex queries - even as total clicks fall (Google Developers). Consequently, as AI features handle more of the exploratory phase, the clicks that remain represent the tail end of an informed journey. Users arrive with clearer intent, engaging more decisively and moving through conversion paths with greater speed and efficiency.

From Volume Metrics to Value Metrics

The new search landscape demands a shift in how marketers evaluate performance. In the future of search, fewer clicks do not always signal a problem. A smaller traffic pool following sufficient presence in AI-powered answers means precision - but it also means the value per visitor has never been higher. Every click that remains is more considered, more intentional, and more commercially viable.

This sets the stage for a new mindset: traffic volume no longer tells the full story of success. The next evolution in measurement is about understanding what kind of traffic you're getting, and what those users do once they arrive

the new metrics of success for search

While impressions and clicks currently remain the primary industry standards, traditional "ranking" has become less trustworthy due to the lack of distinction between different environments. Metrics that are still reliable include Clicks, Sessions, and Conversion Rate, as these are closely tied to lower-funnel keyword intent.

But new metrics are quickly emerging such as Mention, Citation, and Sentiment, with the overarching goal to provide a "Share of Model" which will help advertisers and publishers understand how often their content appears in Large Language Model outputs. These metrics can be regularly measured by third party tools like BrightEdge, Evertune, Share of Model, Profound (like not exhaustive and adoption needs to be tailored for each business need). Focusing on these new metrics can help advertisers and publishers identify their content gap and/or double down a theme and topics they want to be known for.

However, it's important to keep in mind that no industry standard has been established yet, and these metrics can fluctuate significantly due to varying LLMs and highly personalised queries.

The impact of these changes will also differ by industry; for instance, some AI models exclude sectors like Finance and Pharma, which will be more affected, while industries such as Fitness, Travel, and Entertainment may need to adopt new metrics more quickly. Ultimately, the strategy depends on the individual brand and how it ladders up to its specific marketing and business objectives.

In other words, evaluating Search increasingly becomes a full funnel affair. At category and discovery level, share of model dimensions are key. As consumers' intent gets close to the final outcome like specific content consumptions, leads or purchase, traditional metrics remain very valuable to evaluate search effectiveness.

F45 case study

A recent example from F45, a leading global fitness franchise with a major U.S. presence, illustrates how visibility in AI-generated answers can grow when brands actively optimise for it. Since January 2025, AI Overviews across the brand's fitness-related keywords in the U.S. increased by 472%, while F45 grew its own inclusion within those Overviews by 797%, significantly expanding the share of AI answers in which it was cited. This uplift was achieved by focusing on emerging success measures and getting the fundamentals right: ongoing content optimisation, structured-data improvements and authority-building partnerships with brands such as Hyrox and Reebok. This demonstrates how brands that strengthen entity signals, content depth and topical authority can grow their presence within AI-generated summaries, even in a zero-click environment.[2]

[2] (Source: Proprietary data supplied to IAB Australia by F45's partner agency, used with permission from F45)

implications and actions for agencies and brands

Traffic Volume is increasingly likely to be replaced by more valuable clicks and intent compression	***ACTION*** **-** Brands should consider shifting their content strategies to focus more on in-depth content that complements AI-referenced content. This should be designed to add value to the user experience when a user wants to see more.	**PRIORITY** High
Evolve your search measurement framework to integrate the new emerging metrics	***ACTION*** **-** Establish a recurring process to monitor how AI-generated results (AI Overviews, Bing Copilot answers) include or cite brand content. For example, integrate Search Console and Bing Webmaster data into dashboards to track impressions, visibility, Mention, Citation, and Sentiment, without losing focus on metrics that indicate high quality clicks.	**PRIORITY** Medium
Optimise for AI answer readiness, shifting from pure traffic to citation-focused optimisation	***ACTION*** **-** Start auditing and adapting highest-value pages and top-performing content so that they are concise, schema-marked, and answer-friendly for AI and voice interfaces. Ensure E-E-A-T signals (author bios, expertise, source transparency) are clearly embedded.	**PRIORITY** High
The adoption of Agentic AI will continue to disrupt traditional search metrics	***ACTION*** **-** Brands and agencies should begin considering implementing strategies like Microsoft's NLWeb framework to future proof themselves for agentic traffic and accessibility.	**PRIORITY** Medium
Instant Answers and Zero Click are increasingly transforming the search path to purchase	***ACTION*** **-** Instant answers and zero-click search are generating a broader range of search intent further up the funnel, which can lead directly to a conversion/transaction within LLM-powered searches. This means brands need to ensure correct attribution and AI-driven purchase path optimisations to convert users from awareness to purchase in "one session".	**PRIORITY** Medium

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