

The Zero-Click Shift

What AI Overviews and answer engines have already changed about search — and what a growing business needs to do differently to still be found, cited, and chosen.

64.8%

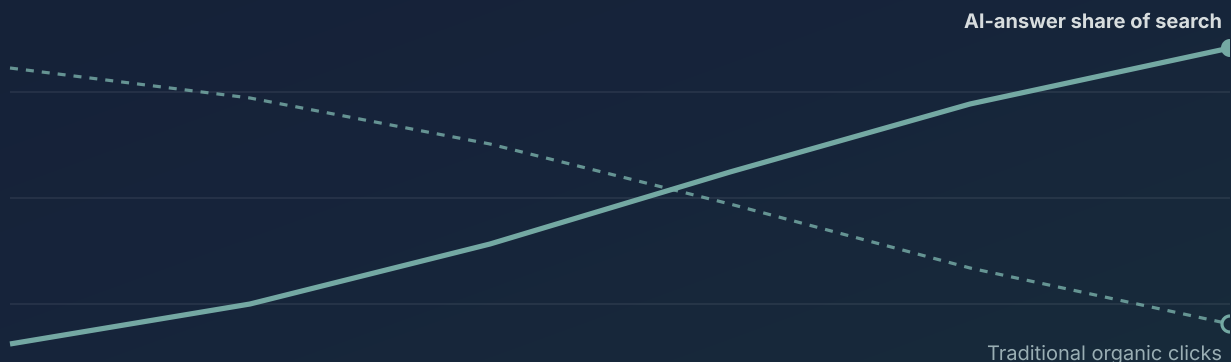
of Google searches now end without a single click

4.4x

higher conversion rate from visitors who do click through from an AI answer

51%

of B2B buyers now start vendor research inside an AI chatbot, not a search bar



ILLUSTRATIVE TREND, NOT MEASURED DATA — SEE SECTION 01 FOR CITED FIGURES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Search still works. It just doesn't work the way it did two years ago.

Search has quietly split into two different systems running at once: the search results your customers still scroll through, and the AI-generated answer sitting above them that a growing share of searchers never scroll past. This report is a plain-language look at what the 2026 data actually shows about that shift — where it costs a business visibility, where it creates a genuine opening, and what's actually within a business's control.

What the data shows, in short

- ◆ **Nearly two-thirds of all Google searches** now end without the searcher clicking anything at all — up sharply from roughly half just a few years ago.
- ◆ AI Overviews cut the click-through rate of the #1 organic result by **almost 38%** when they appear — but the traffic that does click through converts meaningfully better, not worse.
- ◆ Getting *ranked* and getting *cited* by an AI answer are no longer the same task — citation depends on structure, freshness, and sourcing in ways traditional ranking never required.
- ◆ None of this is uniform: a "simple fact" query is close to 90%+ zero-click today; a transactional, ready-to-buy query is still closer to 40% — the shift hits categories very differently.
- ◆ For a local or regional business specifically, the fastest-growing discovery channel outside Google and Facebook is now an AI chatbot recommending a business by name — and it weighs your Google Business Profile and review activity more than your website.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

Every statistic in this report is cited to its original publisher, named in a footnote beneath the figure and in full in the sources section on the final page. Where sources disagree — and on a fast-moving topic like this, they sometimes do — both figures are shown rather than one being quietly dropped.

SECTION 01

The zero-click reality

"Zero-click" simply means a search ends without the searcher clicking any result — the answer, or enough of one, showed up directly on the results page itself. It's not new (featured snippets and knowledge panels have done this for a decade), but AI Overviews have pushed the number sharply higher, and fast.

64.8%

of all Google searches in 2026 end with no click at all — up from roughly 50% in 2019. On mobile specifically, it's higher still, at 77.2%, against 50.6% on desktop.

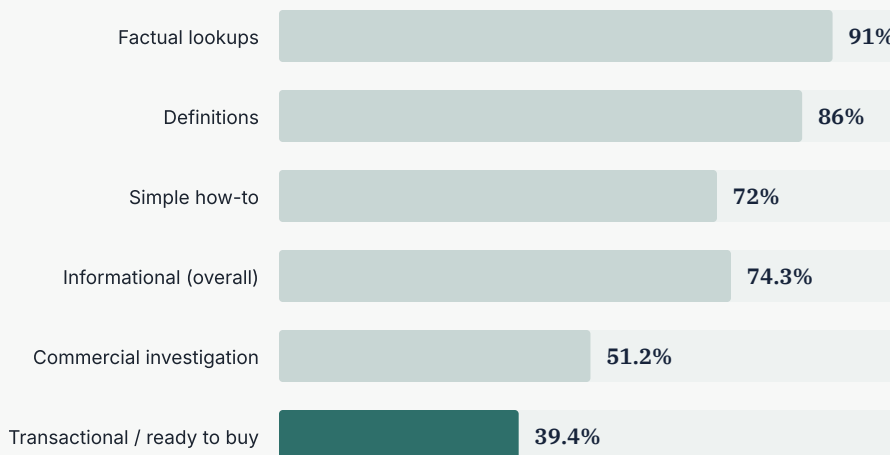
Source: Digital Applied, Zero-Click Search Statistics 2026

It depends enormously on what someone's actually searching for

The average figure hides a very wide range. A simple factual or "how-to" question is answered directly almost every time; a query where someone's actively comparing options or ready to buy still sends the large majority of searchers onward to an actual website.

ZERO-CLICK RATE BY QUERY TYPE

Share of searches ending without a click, by search intent



Source: Digital Applied, Zero-Click Search Statistics 2026

The practical read: searches worth the most to a business — someone comparing vendors, ready to buy — are still the ones most likely to end in a real visit.

Put plainly: the queries AI is swallowing whole are disproportionately the ones that were never going to become a customer anyway — the commercially valuable searches are still landing on real pages.

Not every AI system behaves the same way

Google is the largest search engine by far, but it's no longer the only place this is happening — and the newer, AI-native search tools are even more zero-click by design, because giving a direct answer *is* the product.

ZERO-CLICK RATE BY PLATFORM



Source: Digital Applied, Zero-Click Search Statistics 2026

42.8%

year-over-year growth in AI search visits (Q1 2025 → Q1 2026) — from 15.6B to 27.4B visits

Contently, 2026

51%

of B2B software buyers now start vendor research inside an AI chatbot, up from 29% just twelve months earlier

G2, The Answer Economy 2026

25%

of organic search traffic Gartner projects will shift to AI chatbots and virtual agents by 2026

Gartner, Feb 2024

This isn't a distant, five-years-out trend to plan around eventually — the buyer behavior has already moved. A meaningful and fast-growing share of the people researching a purchase, including B2B purchases, are doing that research inside a chat window rather than a search results page, well before they ever land on a business's website.

"Google queries average 3.37 words. ChatGPT prompts average 23 words — some running past 2,700."

THE GROWTH MEMO, VIA HUBSPOT, 2025

The length gap matters: a searcher typing a 23-word prompt into an AI tool is describing their actual situation, not guessing at keywords — which changes what "ranking for a keyword" is even supposed to mean.

The Zero-Click Reality

SECTION 02

What AI Overviews do to your clicks

When Google shows an AI Overview above the normal results, it changes the math for every position below it — including, and especially, the #1 organic spot that used to be the biggest prize in SEO.

35%+

of informational queries now trigger an AI Overview at all

Digital Applied, 2026

-18%

average organic click-through-rate reduction across all positions when an AI Overview appears

Digital Applied, 2026

-37.5%

CTR decline specifically for the #1 organic position — from 31.7% down to 19.8%

Digital Applied, 2026

The #1 spot loses more than everyone else

This is the part that surprises most site owners: ranking #1 used to be the single best outcome available. When an AI Overview is present, the #1 position is now the position that loses the largest share of its clicks — because it's the position most likely to already be summarized inside the Overview itself, giving the searcher no reason to click through and check.

CTR CHANGE BY POSITION, WITH AN AI OVERVIEW PRESENT



Source: Digital Applied, Zero-Click Search Statistics 2026

A RELATED, SEPARATE SIGNAL

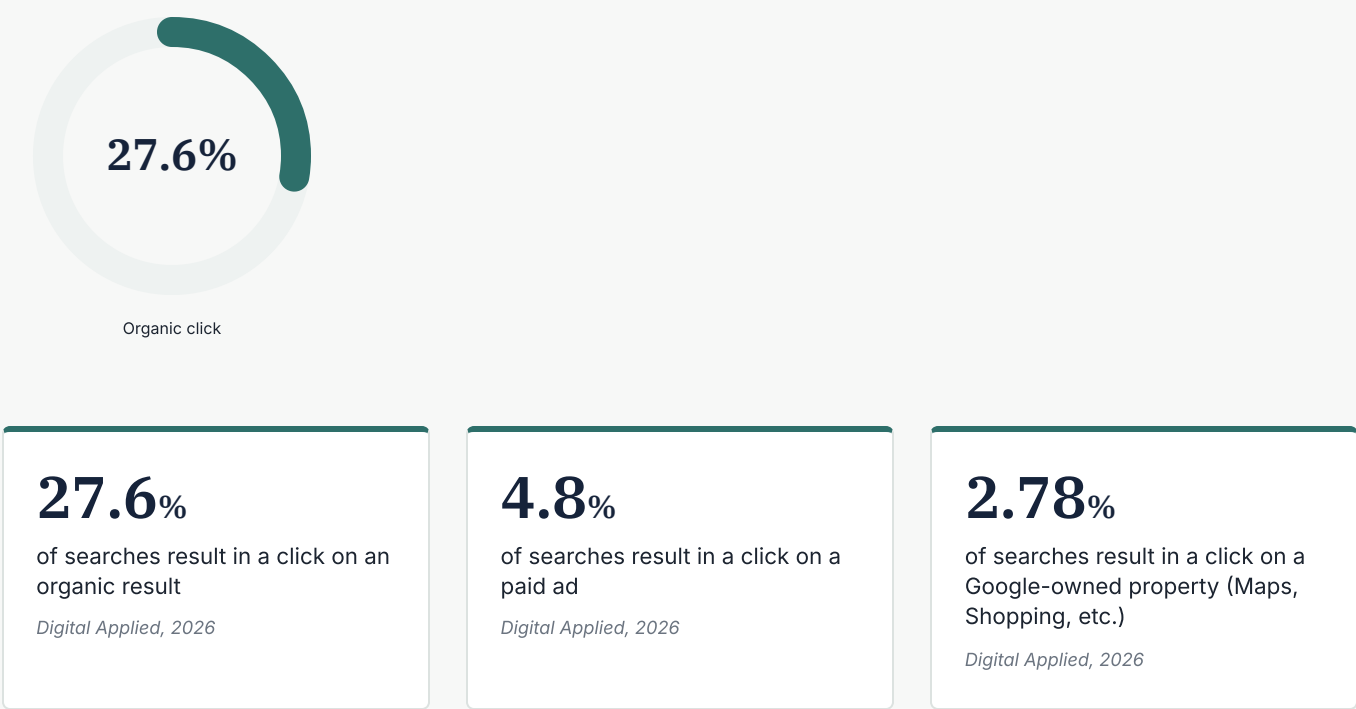
68% of featured snippets are now directly cited inside AI Overviews — meaning the older "position zero" battle for the snippet box didn't go away, it became one of the clearest paths into the newer AI Overview box sitting above it.

Source: Digital Applied, 2026

Where the remaining clicks actually go

Zero-click doesn't mean zero traffic industry-wide — it means the total pool of clicks a results page hands out is smaller, and split differently than it used to be.

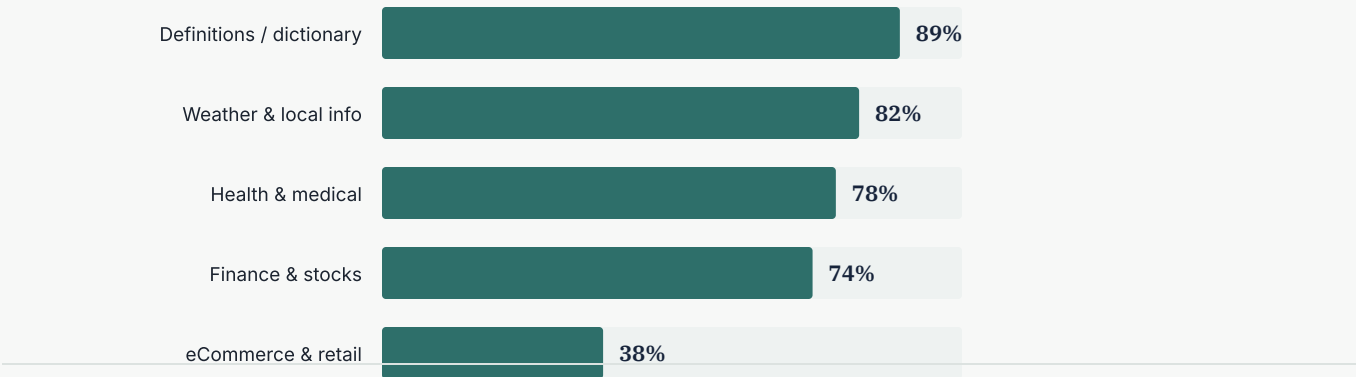
WHERE A GOOGLE SEARCH'S OUTCOME LANDS, ON AVERAGE



It also varies sharply by category

Some categories are far more exposed to this shift than others — largely tracking how "answerable" a query is without visiting an actual business's page.

ZERO-CLICK RATE BY CATEGORY



SECTION 03

The traffic that survives is worth more

This is the part of the data that gets left out of most "SEO is dying" headlines, and it's arguably the most useful finding in this entire report: the visitors who do click through — whether from a normal organic result or, notably, from an AI answer directly — convert at a meaningfully higher rate than pre-AI-Overview organic traffic did.

+23%

higher conversion rate for organic clicks that survive alongside an AI Overview, versus standard organic traffic

Digital Applied, 2026

4.4x

higher conversion rate for AI-referred visitors specifically, versus traditional organic visitors

Semrush, 2025

+68%

more time spent on-site by AI-referred visitors, versus organic visitors

SE Ranking, 2025

A ChatGPT referral converts at roughly 14–16%. Google organic converts at roughly 1.76%.

SEER INTERACTIVE, JUNE 2025 — A 9X DIFFERENTIAL

Why the surviving traffic converts better

The explanation isn't mysterious once you sit with it: an AI answer already did the "am I even in the right category" filtering that a search results page never used to do. A searcher who reads a full AI-generated answer and still clicks through to a specific business's page has already decided that business is worth a closer look — they're not landing there by accident the way a lot of top-of-funnel organic traffic used to.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

Chasing raw traffic volume back to pre-AI-Overview levels is the wrong goal. The right goal is showing up as one of the sources an AI answer actually names and links to — because that specific kind of click is worth several times more than an average organic visit, even though there are fewer of them overall.

The adoption gap — most businesses haven't caught up yet

The traffic-quality upside above is real, but it's currently going almost entirely to the small share of businesses that have actually started optimizing for it. Everyone else is still measuring and managing search the old way.



WHY BUSINESSES HAVEN'T STARTED — STATED BARRIERS



Source: Acquia/Researchscape, 2025

None of these barriers are really about the size of the opportunity — they're about the fact that most marketing teams, including at genuinely well-run businesses, simply haven't built a process for this yet. That's the gap Section 4 addresses directly: what actually, concretely moves the needle on being cited.

SECTION 04

How businesses actually get cited

Getting cited by an AI answer is a different exercise from classic SEO ranking, and the overlap between the two is smaller than most businesses assume — meaning a page that ranks well in Google's traditional results is not automatically a page an AI Overview or ChatGPT will cite.

8%

is the overlap between ChatGPT's citations and Google's own top-10 organic results — meaning standard SEO addresses only a small fraction of what actually drives AI citation. Perplexity shows the highest overlap among standalone AI tools, at 28%.

Source: Ahrefs Brand Radar (Linehan & Guan), 15,000-prompt study

What actually correlates with getting cited

A 2024 peer-reviewed study out of Princeton, Georgia Tech, and IIT Delhi remains the closest thing this field has to foundational research — it tested nine optimization techniques across 10,000 real queries and measured the citation-visibility lift from each one.

CITATION-VISIBILITY LIFT, BY CONTENT TECHNIQUE

Peer-reviewed study, 10,000 queries, 9 tested optimization methods



Source: Aggarwal et al., Princeton/Georgia Tech/IIT Delhi, ACM KDD 2024

Every one of those four is something a business already writing genuinely researched content — the way, for instance, real case studies with cited data are written — was already doing before "AEO" was a term anyone used. This is good news: it means becoming citable isn't really a new skill to learn from scratch, it's an extension of writing well-sourced, specific content instead of generic marketing copy.

Structure and freshness matter more than most businesses assume

2.8x

citation lift from clear, sequential heading structure (H2 → H3 → H4) versus unstructured content

AirOps, State of AI Search 2026

44.2%

of all AI citations are pulled from just the first 30% of a page's content — the opening matters disproportionately

SparkToro, Jan 2026

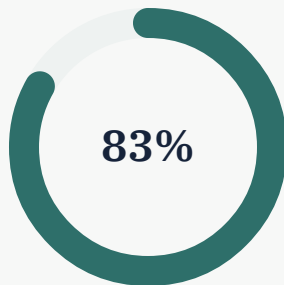
3x

more likely to be cited: content specifically formatted for clean extraction versus unstructured equivalents

Jack Limebear AEO analysis, 2026

CONTENT FRESHNESS AND CITATION LIKELIHOOD

83% of citations on commercial/evaluation queries come from content updated within the last 12 months



content <12mo old

Content refreshed within 30 days earns roughly **3.2x more citations** than older content (ConvertMate); pages left unrefreshed for a quarter or more are roughly **3x more likely to lose citations** they'd previously earned (AirOps). A page written once and never revisited has a real, measurable expiration date on its ability to get cited — independent of whether the information on it is still accurate.

Who's actually getting cited right now

31%

of AI Overview citations now go to brand/business websites directly — up from 26% a year earlier

Presenc AI, Apr 2026

0.65

linear correlation between a domain's authority and how often it gets cited — strong, but far from the whole story

Jack Limebear, 2026

115%

citation-visibility improvement seen by page-5-ranked content after applying AEO techniques — vs. almost no change for already-#1 content

Princeton/GT/IIT-Delhi, 2024

SECTION 05

The local business angle

Most of the AEO research above comes from publisher and enterprise SEO data — but a local or regional business is being evaluated by a different, narrower set of signals, and the discovery channel itself is shifting even faster.

30x

more selective — AI platforms recommending local businesses are reported to be roughly thirty times more selective than a traditional Google search, meaning a high Google ranking is no guarantee of an AI mention at all.

Source: SEOProfy, AI SEO for Local Businesses 2026

Three controllable factors decide whether an AI recommends you

1. **Data accuracy across every listing.** AI tools synthesize information from multiple sources at once — a business's own site, its Google Business Profile, and platforms like Yelp. Inconsistent name, address, or phone data across those sources visibly undermines an AI system's confidence in recommending the business at all.
2. **Review quality and response rate.** ChatGPT tends to recommend businesses averaging 4.3 stars; Gemini, 3.9. Response speed compounds this — one documented case reaching strong AI visibility had answered 98.3% of its reviews, averaging a 0.6-day response time.
3. **Cross-platform consistency.** The same three sources — a business's own website, its Google Business Profile, and high-traffic review platforms — are where AI tools draw from most heavily. Synchronized information across all three is table stakes, not a bonus.

Source: SEOProfy, AI SEO for Local Businesses 2026

Structured data does real work here

28%

increase in AI citations from properly implemented Article schema markup

SEOProfy, 2026

89%

of consumers say they prefer businesses that respond to all their reviews, not just the negative ones

SEOProfy, 2026

58%

lower average click-through rate for a page that ranks #1 in traditional search once an AI Overview is present above it — the same pattern Section 2 showed, confirmed again in local-specific data

SEOProfy, 2026

Where this is heading

ChatGPT and other AI platforms are already the third most common source of local business recommendations, behind only Google and Facebook — and by 2028, AI platforms are projected to drive more website visits than traditional search engines do today, across categories generally, not just for large publishers.

WHY THIS CONNECTS DIRECTLY TO WORK ALREADY UNDERWAY

The three controllable factors above — listing accuracy, review management, and Google Business Profile completeness — are exactly the local-visibility fundamentals covered in Cyeon's earlier Insight reports on Google Business Profile weighting and the local Map Pack. AEO for a local business isn't a separate discipline bolted on top of local SEO; it's the same fundamentals, now read by one more audience.

SECTION 06

A practical framework

None of the above requires abandoning search visibility work that already works — it requires extending it in a few specific, testable directions.

1. **Write content built to be extracted, not just read.** Clear sequential headings (H2 → H3 → H4), the key answer stated plainly in the opening third of the page, and real statistics with real sources cited inline — not buried in a downloadable PDF nobody opens.
2. **Treat existing content as a maintenance job, not a launch-and-forget asset.** A quarterly refresh cycle on the pages that matter most protects citation eligibility that erodes automatically as content ages.
3. **Get the structured data in place.** Article and FAQ schema markup, applied consistently, is one of the few purely technical levers with a directly measured citation lift.
4. **For any local or multi-location business, treat Google Business Profile and review management as AEO infrastructure** — not a separate "local marketing" task, but one of the three factors AI tools weigh most heavily when recommending a business by name.
5. **Measure the traffic that's actually converting, not just the traffic that's shrinking.** A falling click count next to a rising conversion rate from the clicks that remain is not the same story as a business in decline — conflating the two is the single most common mistake being made with this data right now.

WHAT THIS ISN'T

This isn't a call to abandon traditional SEO, and it isn't a claim that AI search will fully replace it. The data in Section 1 shows real search — the kind that still sends a visitor to an actual page — remains dominant for exactly the categories that matter most commercially: anyone actively comparing options or ready to buy. The work is additive, not a replacement.

METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

Where this data comes from

Every statistic in this report is drawn from a published, named source — no figure here is estimated, modeled, or invented by Cyeon. Where recent industry research disagreed on a number (which happens, on a topic moving this quickly), both figures are shown rather than one being silently chosen. This report was compiled from the sources below, current as of the report's publish date; AI search behavior is evolving quickly enough that we'd recommend treating any number here as directionally reliable rather than permanently fixed.

- — Digital Applied — Zero-Click Search Statistics 2026: Complete Data Guide (digitalapplied.com)
- — Digital Applied — AI SEO Statistics 2026: Data Points on Zero-Click Search, Rankings & Organic Traffic Decline (digitalapplied.com)
- — Omnibound — Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) Statistics 2026 (omnibound.ai)
- — AEOfix — Answer Engine Ranking Factors: Complete AEO Guide 2026 (aeofix.com)
- — SEOProfy — AI SEO for Local Businesses: The Complete Guide for 2026 (seoprofy.com)
- — G2 — The Answer Economy: 2026 B2B Buyer Behavior Report (g2.com)
- — Gartner — organic search traffic shift to AI chatbots and virtual agents, Feb 2024
- — Contently — AI search visit growth analysis, 2026
- — Ahrefs Brand Radar (Linehan & Guan) — 15,000-prompt AI citation overlap study
- — Aggarwal et al. — Generative Engine Optimization study, Princeton/Georgia Tech/IIT Delhi, ACM KDD 2024
- — AirOps — 2026 State of AI Search Report (aiops.com)
- — SparkToro — AI citation position analysis, Jan 2026
- — Jack Limebear — AEO domain-authority and citation analysis, 2026
- — ConvertMate — content freshness and citation analysis, 80M citations
- — Presenc AI — AI Overview citation source analysis, Apr 2026 (84K queries)
- — 5WPR — AI Platform Citation Source Index 2026
- — Semrush — AI referral conversion analysis, June 2025 (500+ high-value topics)
- — Seer Interactive — ChatGPT vs. Google organic conversion analysis, June 2025
- — SE Ranking — AI-referred visitor engagement analysis, 2025
- — Acquia / Researchscape — AEO adoption and barriers survey, 2025 (n=500+)
- — The Growth Memo, via HubSpot — query length comparison, 2025
- — Similarweb — zero-click rate trend analysis since AI Overviews launch, 2025

CLOSING NOTE

Being findable and being cited are becoming two different jobs. Most businesses are still only doing the first one.

Where Cyeon can help

This report is the diagnostic. If you want a plain answer on where your own site currently stands — what's still working, what's quietly losing visibility, and what's realistic to fix first — that's a conversation, not a sales pitch.

[Talk to Cyeon →](#)