



DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE AI WORLD

Visit Portsmouth

www.visitportsmouth.co.uk

David Howells

David.Howells@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

Introduction

We have firmly entered the AI age, one that many forecasters claim could have just as seismic an impact on behaviours and actions as the advent of the internet itself. Of course, such developments always bring both changes and challenges, and in the tourism industry we are already noticing some of the most transformative.

This whitepaper outlines the current landscape of AI, how it will impact (and already is impacting) the tourism industry, and the ways that businesses operating within the visitor economy can better handle the changes.

Note: No AI was used in the creation of this whitepaper. Though I'm regretting that now, as it will have certainly made the whole process a lot quicker...

Glossary of terms and Initialisms

AI - Artificial Intelligence

The catch-all term for machine learning tools, solutions and devices. It covers any method of simulating human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and creativity.

LLM - Large Language Model

A huge dataset from which AI tools learn words, definitions, synonyms, uses in context, and more. AI tools that generate content or use semantics in their output utilise Large Language Models.

Hallucinations

An instance where an AI engine has seemingly made up a demonstrably false assertion, based on spurious source information or the creation of fake details to fill content gaps.

RAG - Retrieval-Augmented Generation

An AI framework that improves LLM accuracy by searching for and retrieving information (from external, trusted sources) to fill knowledge gaps, improve accuracy and reduce hallucinations. 'Grounding' is a term that also comes up in this sense. RAG is the method; Grounding is the goal.

SEO - Search Engine Optimisation

The process by which a webmaster tweaks their website (or wider digital presence) to appear more highly in search engines such as Google.

GEO - Generative Engine Optimisation

A new term covering the tools and techniques used to get a brand mentioned in AI engines. It's SEO but for AI. There are many variants (another popular one is AEO, or Answer Engine Optimisation) but GEO has become a frontrunner in terms of popularity and usage.

The current landscape

The 'dawn of AI' era has already passed. Experts and futurologists alike are racing to declare that "the genie is out of the bottle" or "the toothpaste is out of the tube" - both comments I've seen in research for this paper.

However, they are - indeed - true.

UK government figures note that the AI sector is growing at a pace 30 times faster than the rest of the economy. What's more, these were from June 2025 - usage and investment has only increased since then.

McKinsey research found that generative AI's market penetration increased from 33% in 2023 to 71% in 2024.

Note: A list of those cited in this report is included at the end.

In a study involving 48,000 respondents across 47 countries, KPMG found that 66% of people use AI tools for personal, work, or study purposes. Louise Linehan of Ahrefs put this into stark perspective, noting that we are twice as likely to engage with AI than we are to eat a balanced diet - as only 31% of UK adults consume the recommended five portions of fruit and veg every day (Public Sector Catering).

ChatGPT has become the most well-known AI engine, even following Google by entering the realms of its name becoming a verb. It has, in just a few short years, grown to become the 9th most visited website globally (Ahrefs). It has a weekly active user base of 800 million (TechCrunch) and handles 1.5 billion prompts daily (OpenAI - with statistics from July 2025, so this is likely a lot more today). In fact, Ahrefs put the rate of growth for ChatGPT usage at 14.1% every month.

It's not just usage increasing, but trust as well. The University of Melbourne found that almost half of people (46%) put their faith in AI's recommendations, and 66% say they use AI regularly. Usage and trust are both higher among the young, the university educated and those on a higher income.

A 2025 study in the US from tech giant Adobe found that around 30% of people trust ChatGPT more than traditional search engines. Some 36% also reported discovering a new product or brand through AI tools.

Comparing further across the generations, Barna says that 49% of Baby Boomers describe themselves as 'AI-sceptical', versus just 29% of those in Gen Z who said the same. As the purchasing power of the younger generation grows it's likely that conversational search on AI models will become the norm.

AI and tourism

The tourism industry faces AI challenges and opportunities earlier than most. A McKinsey report from the US found that more than 55% of people use AI-enabled tools when planning travel - a trend that's increasing rapidly.

There's also the issue of mobile versus desktop. We in the travel sector typically see a higher-than-average rate of mobile traffic to our websites - especially during the information gathering phase. Similarly, AI usage is higher on mobile devices than desktops.

Looking ahead, "agentic" AI is the anticipated next step. This is where AI tools go further than just gathering and presenting information but are capable of actually performing tasks - potentially even making bookings or purchases on a user's behalf. It's only reasonable to expect that many people's initial experiences with an agent AI will be a travel agent AI.

Surely enough, a Forrester survey in the US found that 36% of adults would be somewhat or very interested in delegating an AI agent to find and book travel reservations. When isolating Gen Z, the figure was above half - 53%.

AI versus search

Perhaps AI's biggest impact has been felt in the world of search, where the likes of AI Overviews and AI Mode have fundamentally changed the Google product offer and had a demonstrable impact on referral traffic.

AI Overviews are the AI-generated summaries given by Google for relevant search queries. The development was first announced in May 2023 (then called 'Search Generative Experience') and launched formally in May 2024. In the US, AIOs display for more than 12.5% of all search queries.

AIOs have been referred to as 'Position Zero', usurping the previous gold standard of Position One, which was the holy grail for clicks through (and the primary aim of all SEO).

AI Mode (announced in March 2025 then rolled out from May that year) is the much more GPT-style tool that uses longer-form, conversational and semantic search, delivering responses that are frequently four times longer than AI Overviews.

To complete the timeline, Google released an algorithm update in June 2025 that further boosted the frequency of AI Overview appearances (up 11% on mobile and 15% on desktop), as well as further rewarding EEAT content - which is covered in more detail on page 12.

AI Overviews and their impact on CTRs

AIOs are the closest like-for-like replacement for the old Knowledge Graph/Featured Snippets. As with their predecessors, Google appeared to originally suggest that AIOs were just another route to market and a way to effectively answer user questions (whilst rewarding authoritative content) - and therefore they wouldn't reduce click-through rates (CTRs).

However, Ahrefs found in April 2025 that clicks to top-ranking pages dropped 34.5% within just one month of the AIO launch. In December that year, Ahrefs ran the numbers again - the presence of an AIO then correlated with a 58% reduction in CTRs.

Even if we just take the original figure, given that (according to Exploding Topics) there are approximately 16.4 billion searches on Google every day, a 34.5% drop would mean 5.6 billion fewer clicks every single day. If we went for the larger figure, it would represent a 9.5 billion drop in clicks.

A point of note as Ahrefs research comes up quite frequently in this guide - its studies are industry leading, as the company typically using a huge database of real-world stats and figures. In the 2025 research detailed above, the involved research on 300,000 keywords, consisting of 150,000 where there was an AI Overview present, and 150,000 with informational intent and no AI Overview present.

Pew has found similarly damning results, claiming that users who encounter an AI summary click on a traditional search result in just 8% of visits, compared to the 15% who click through without one. It also said that 26% of users end their session completely after seeing an AI summary (vs 16% for traditional search).

Analytics company Authoritas claims that a site previously ranked in Position One could lose about 79% of its traffic if that query now delivers an AI Overview. Looking at the longer-form AI Mode sessions, iPullRank found that only 4.5% resulted in a click.

What's more, the usage of AIOs is growing. BrightEdge found that the travel sector saw a 108% increase in the number of AI Overviews presented to users between May 2024 and April 2025. In total, more than a quarter of all internet users have so far accessed AIOs.

Visit Portsmouth website hosts Granicus said that changes in the AI landscape mean that websites for tourism-related businesses can expect to see pageview drops of between 5 and 25%. Considering DMO websites specifically (Visit [Destination] sites), Granicus found they had typically seen organic traffic declines of between 20 and 40% year-on-year, and that was just between 2023 and 2024, before AI Mode and during the very earliest days of AIOs.

Whilst this may seem like a lot of doom and gloom, it's worth remembering that whilst brands may be losing search traffic because of AIOs (and any other related 'zero click' developments), there's no drop off in user interest.

If a user is searching for a query that provides information about your organisation, they are still interested. It's just the KPIs and metrics that need to shift.

As SEO author Aleyda Solis notes: "AI search functions both as a performance and branding channel. As user journeys increasingly complete inside AI answers, **traffic alone is no longer a reliable indicator of success**, making expanded KPIs and goals necessary."

It's also worth noting that AIOs are (at least for the time being) rare for local searches. People seeking events, attractions or recommendations near them will still be driven primarily to the map and traditional SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages). Ahrefs has found only 7.9% of location-based searches currently trigger AIOs.

AI Mode

The newer of Google's two AI tools is impacting search and clicks in another way. AI Mode's responses are typically four times longer than AI Overviews, and work in a more conversational, two-way dialogue, similar to the likes of ChatGPT.

That said, it should be worth noting that AI Overviews and AI Mode often reach very similar conclusions. This is a common feature across the AI landscape, with different tools - each using their own unique reference points and original sources - coming to remarkably similar conclusions. This may not come as such a huge surprise, though, as authority, knowledge and expertise on a subject are huge drivers of what AI engines deem as good resources to inform their responses. Like if you asked two separate mechanics how to change the spark plugs on a K reg Ford Fiesta, they may have got their information from different locations, but the end result will be the same.

Ahrefs found that even though their sources overlap in just 13.7% of cases, AIO and AI Mode responses showed an 86% similarity.

Even across different companies the trend is present: Google AI tools and ChatGPT largely mention the same brands, showing a high output overlap correlation. The only small difference is that AI Mode skews more heavily towards established brands, whereas ChatGPT is more willing to feature start-ups and disruptors.

That said, whilst they often mention the same brands, Google's AI Mode will do it significantly more often than AIOs - where 26% of brands have zero mentions whatsoever.

With AI Mode providing more in-depth returns, there are opportunities to rank here for those organisations producing unique content with optimised titles and headers, engaging imagery, a good linking structure, and a scannable page structure (more on this in the Content Marketing section below).

ChatGPT

Before getting into tips and solutions for search marketing in this new world, it's worth noting some more helpful stats and information on the biggest AI engine in the game - ChatGPT.

Data from July 2025 said ChatGPT processed 2.5 billion prompts every single day. However, that's just 18% of the 13.7 billion searches that Google handles (which is worked out from the 5 trillion annual searches figure the company announced in January 2025).

Where search marketing is concerned, it's worth remembering that ChatGPT doesn't have rankings as we traditionally know them. Instead, its responses are probabilistic - changing frequently and even giving different responses when asked an identical question by two different people.

SparkToro has gone one step further - running the numbers and estimating that even if you asked ChatGPT a question 100 times, there's less than a 1 in 100 chance that it will provide the same list of brands in *any* two responses.

It's worth noting here that this is another industry-wide quirk and not one that's exclusive to ChatGPT. Tests have been done on Google's AIs that asked the same question twice; it not only didn't reference the same brands, but also saw fundamental differences in content. Whilst the conclusions remained largely the same, there was a 70% chance (according to Ahrefs) that the output would be different even if the queries were identical.

Continuing to compare ChatGPT and Google, the former definitely prefers fresher content. Ahrefs found that 76.4% of ChatGPT's most-cited pages were updated in the past 30 days. Google AI, on the other hand, is slightly less influenced by content freshness. Here, just over a quarter (26%) of blogs used as research sources had been updated within the previous two months.

But don't worry - you won't need to constantly refresh all the pages on your site to curry favour with AI. Those cited above may have been very fresh (as AI will favour the very latest figures when returning stats, reports and trends, for example), but typically they were blogs - not static page content. Elsewhere there's a much longer time period. The average age of a URL cited by search engine AI is 1,432 days (Ahrefs). For AI assistants it drops to 1,064 - and whilst this 25.7% (and almost exactly an entire year) younger, it's still almost three years old.

AI In content marketing

Giving thought to the various AI tools and how to be featured on them is only half the story when it comes to digital marketing. There's also the issue of using AI ourselves to create more and better content.

Perhaps the most surprising of all the facts and figures included in this report is the following:

Google doesn't penalise AI content.

Knowing the company's previous hardline stance on such techniques as keyword stuffing, it would be reasonable to assume that Google would take a dim view of organisations using AI-generated content.

But this is not the case.

Perhaps it's because, through AIOs and AI Mode, Google has leant heavily into this new world, so cannot in good faith denounce others who also do the same. It may also know that the horse has

already bolted. Ahrefs research claims that 74% of new website content is now AI-generated, and that websites making use of AI content grow 5% faster than those that don't. You can see why: AI-generated content is 4.7x cheaper to produce than its human-made alternative.

Either way, Google has laid out its position quite starkly:

"Appropriate use of AI or automation is not against our guidelines. This means that it is not used to generate content primarily to manipulate search rankings, which is against our guidelines. Automation has long been used in publishing to create useful content. AI can assist with and generate useful content in exciting new ways."

Whilst Google may not penalise AI content, however, it does penalise *bad* content. Those two aren't identical but they can be very close. As with all AI-generated content, there should be oversight, and preferably a good edit and rewrite before anything makes it onto any public-facing channel.

Google hasn't echoed the above advice formally, but it does seem to be the search giant's position because - at least for the time being - purely AI content rarely reaches Position One in organic results.

If you are to use generative AI, remember to RACE when it comes to prompting - that is: Role, Action, Context, Expectation.

Role: I am a digital marketer

Action: I am conducting a content audit

Context: There has been a decline in organic traffic

Expectation: I want a comprehensive audit report identifying pages with low traffic, keyword gaps and opportunities for new content.

Carry on SEO-ing

Or: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

There are many ways to bolster your digital marketing in the post-AI world, but to begin: continuing with traditional search marketing is a good foundation.

After all, Google still sends 345x more traffic to websites than ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity combined (Ahrefs).

Comparing both ChatGPT and Google:

- For every search-like query on ChatGPT, there are 8.33 in Google.
- Google drives 190 times more traffic to websites than ChatGPT does. Looking at it from the opposite angle, ChatGPT's CTR is 96% lower than Google's.
- Look at your website's traffic acquisition report and it's likely that Google is around the 40% mark, ChatGPT will be nearer 0.2%.

It gets more damning the further along the AI route you go, as ChatGPT may refer just one in every 500 visitors to your website - but that's still likely to be around eight or even nine times that of the next leading AI-first platform (according to our old friends Ahrefs).

Of course, Google's central objective remains being a way to connect people with websites (despite some of its latest AI roll outs seemingly doing the direct opposite). ChatGPT, on the other hand, keeps people in conversation - for which it's more like the social networks which are often reluctant to drive traffic away.

If clicks are your aim, remember: 96.98% of them come from the top 10 search results (Ahrefs), so SEO remains imperative.

There's also the RAG point to note.

RAG, as a reminder, stands for Retrieval-Augmented Generation and is when AI engines - faced with a query to which they don't have a full answer - search for the results.

Therefore: appear in search, appear in AI (speaking very broadly).

The stats do back this up, however. Websites with more organic search traffic get mentioned more in AI search results. Brands in the top 25% for web mentions earn over 10 times more AI Overview mentions than those in the 26-50% quartile. 76% of sites named in AIOs were also present within the top 10 search results (an Ahrefs study of some 1.9 million AIO citations).

A quick word of warning, though: don't use LLMs for SEO advice. According to Google's own John Mueller: "They learn from all the bad SEO information out there."

One handy technical SEO tip that's an easy fix - sort AI-generated 404 errors.

Whether it's because of old links not redirecting, misspellings, or simple hallucinations, AI results can sometimes deliver incorrect URLs. In fact, Ahrefs tested it and found AI to generate broken links 2.9 times more often than good old Google. What's more, with some website systems automatically putting certain blanket redirects in place, it says this 2.9x figure could actually be a fairly sizeable under-reporting of hallucinated URLs. They may well be correct - the New York Times found a 33% hallucination rate in OpenAI's o3 model, and 48% in o4-mini.

Either way, the solution is the same: improve your 404 page with informative content and links (not keeping it as the default 404 page) and set up redirects whenever an old page is moved, removed or renamed,

Digital marketing for AI

Traditional SEO may well have its place in the post-AI world, but there are still ways of marketing for AI - and there are many good reasons to do so.

First off, the referral traffic statistics above may not quite tell the full story. Many users, for example, may have done their research on the likes of ChatGPT, found or been recommended a solution they liked, and *then* gone on Google to discover more or make a purchase. That will be chalked up as a win for search, but it was AI that did much of the legwork. Accurate attribution here is difficult.

Similarly, even if traffic volumes from AI sources are significantly lower than those from search, intent is likely a lot higher. A user that has had conversations with an AI engine (which has been trained on their likes and preferences, and therefore already covered much of the top-of-funnel information) is likely much more ready to convert.

Ahrefs' own stats on sign-ups to its newsletter bear this out. Despite referrals from AI making up just 0.5% of its website traffic, this group of visitors account for 12% of newsletter sign-ups (a conversion rate 23 times higher than that from search traffic).

So now we enter the world of GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation).

Whereas technical SEO relies more on the likes of backlinks and keywords, GEO is more about brand awareness, multi-channel marketing and consistency of message. Or to put it very succinctly:

Optimise everywhere.

Search is no longer a single channel. It includes GEO and encompasses a multi-layered ecosystem where Google, AI answers, social platforms, and user conversations all shape how brands are discovered.

Of course, this content diversification doesn't come cheap. SEO expert Daniel Foley Carter warned: "Expect to make 10x effort for the same volume of clicks."

The AI citation superpower: Brand mentions

Among the biggest drivers for AI marketing are brand mentions. They don't even need to be links - simple brand mentions are enough, provided they're from a reputable source and the messaging stays consistent. The more times your brand is mentioned online, the more touchpoints LLMs have to cite your brand as the answer to related queries.

In fact, link volume appears to have little impact on AI visibility. Ahrefs found very weak correlations between the number of backlinks a site has (a major SEO goal) and its volume of brand mentions across all AI systems. Simple branded web mentions, on the other hand, correlated very strongly with visibility in ChatGPT, AI Mode, and AI Overviews. These were much more valuable, provided they were across a broad scope of quality sites.

If you're looking at potential locations for additional brand mentions, YouTube and Reddit are two good places to start.

YouTube is already training data for LLMs, so the number of mentions and the volume of impressions that these receive are strongly correlated with ChatGPT visibility. Of course, it's long been worth having a presence on YouTube anyway - with it being the world's second largest search engine, having 3.7 billion organic visits every month, and 2.5 billion active users worldwide (Statista). But more recently it has also become the second most cited URL in AIOs. The first is Reddit.

The popularity of Reddit as a source for AI engines is a reflection of their reliance on trustworthiness and consensus. Reddit is a forum with entirely user-generated content. Each post and reply is up- or down-voted by the community - which provides AIs with an empirical consensus on what is valued, respected or true. And that's without even considering the type of content that commonly appears on Reddit: i.e. questions and answers. These directly mirror what people are typing into AI engines, so it's logical that Reddit features heavily in their responses.

Whilst Google's AIO's may have YouTube as the second most cited source, for ChatGPT that honour goes to Wikipedia. Again, this is something of an answer engine, with many millions of users, and a lot of long-tail, keyword-rich content, so not a huge surprise.

Whilst TripAdvisor hasn't been mentioned so much as an AI source, it being similar to Reddit in providing user-generated reviews, answers and insight means that it may be a good area on which to focus for authoritative brand mentions.

To save time or resources, specifically target the websites that AI solutions are frequently citing for your business or industry. Research beforehand will give you a list of targets, to which you can reach out with requests for branded mentions.

Aleyda Solis, who we met earlier, also advises: "Building positive third-party citations is becoming as strategically important as earning relevant backlinks. Aligning SEO with digital PR and community management is now fundamental to shaping a consistent and credible brand presence."

So while clicks might be dropping, visibility in AI-generated responses is a powerful new form of brand exposure. And of course, it's not just about getting clicks and numbers, even if they look good in a report. Being cited as a source in AI responses positions a brand as the definitive authority. It's an opportunity to build awareness and trust on a massive scale, establishing and reinforcing them as official sources of information.

Content marketing for AI

In the AI world, search marketing has shifted from links to answers. To stand out, brands must lean into their expertise become a singular, authoritative voice - whether that's by writing content that nobody else can, producing original research, or simply offering a uniquely human

perspective. On that final point, writing as though you're speaking to a friend is a good shorthand to act as a guide.

Things may have shifted slightly in recent years to work for the AI marketplace, but content marketing best practice remains bound up in Google's long-time recommendation: EEAT.

EEAT stands for Experience, Expertise, Authority, Trust, and has long been a cornerstone of successful digital content. In the AI world it's even more pertinent, as instead of covering a specific set of keywords, rich content like this meaningfully covers the concepts and provides the answers that people expect to be returned for their related searches.

Like with Ahrefs' discovery that backlinks had little correlation with AI mentions, there was a similarly low relationship between content volume (number of site pages) and AI visibility. It's not a content creation arms race, more a chance to establish market-leading expertise and authority.

Similarweb took this further, arguing: "Functional beats aspirational. Transparency trumps fluff. Brand strength counts. Be trusted in the community. Lean into the niche."

It advocated the use of answer-shaped content; spoon-feeding the 'answer engines' with well-structured articles from which they can easily scrape information.

Structural Integrity

Countless blogs and articles have been written that suggest - for AI - the structure of a page is as important as the content itself. The use of question-based header tags, ordered correctly, will show LLMs not only what is significant, but the order of importance too.

This appears to bear out in the research: AI engines will cite headers that contain question marks more than twice as often as headers that are simple statements (ALM Corp). It's easy to see why - if the header mirrors a user query, the content below it will likely be the answer they're seeking.

Many also advise to write so-called 'atomic paragraphs' - where each one is capable of standing alone as a complete answer if extracted out of context. Of course, this isn't exactly possible in the real world, but can factor into your content writing (and aligns with the long-standing journalistic 'inverted pyramid' template - or BLUF: bottom line up front - where a user can get all the essentials out of a story from its first line, some more information from the second, and so on).

If you need any more encouragement to front-load your key, AI-friendly information, Growth Memo analysis of some 1.2 million citations on ChatGPT found that 44.2% come from the first 30% of on-page content. A further 31.1% comes from the middle section (30-70%), with the final segment being the source of the remaining 24.7%.

To put these figures another way: if you have a key insight, including it in the latter part of your content means ChatGPT is 2.5 times less likely to cite it than if it appeared nearer the top.

As for content length, it seems that's much less of a concern too.

Longer articles may still be good for traditional SEO, but there's a "near zero" (Ahrefs) correlation between word count and AI citation. LLMs seemingly don't care how long a blog is, only that it answers a user query quickly and directly (and in a way that can be easily parsed).

Articles may no longer need to hit a word count, but it's wise to ensure the content itself is snappy, direct and confident. Cited text in AI answers has been shown to be more definitive. Keep things vague and washy and it'll likely be skipped. If your website contains incomplete content, AI will look elsewhere to fill the gaps - either at your competitors or by finding erroneous or even hallucinated information.

As this content is your official, party line, it should cover everything - the good, the bad and the ugly. If people are searching for it, better they get the official story from your own website than somewhere else.

Need further proof that detailed, factual, direct and statistical content is favoured by AI engines? 'Press' sections on websites show a clear disparity among search and AI traffic, being low among the former and high for the latter. As the articles in these are typically written in a direct, informative and data-led way, they give AI models the desired solid, answer-based content.

For this reason, AI and search can (and should) be used side-by-side. Search brings in significantly more traffic and rewards hero pages. AI tools, on the other hand, collate content - often from lower-down pages - thereby bringing more of the site into regular engagement.

The humble FAQ is one that works well on both search and AI. Its format is structured as a Q&A by default (and there's often schema markup built in), so it's naturally atomic content and framed perfectly for LLMs.

Elsewhere, whilst BuzzFeed may be long past its day in the sun, its shadow looms large even today. 'Best of' articles do well with AI, so too listicles.

Then there's the issue of refreshing old content.

As noted earlier, AI has a stronger recency bias than search - often favouring newer links. Where you have evergreen content, the hard part has already been done. All you need to do is update it to include some more recent figures, maybe rework the content, order or structure now you know what AI tools value, then re-publish with today's date.

Be warned, though: you do still need to make substantial changes. Simply making a handful of superficial adjustments and altering the date can give you a negative score in search (and one that's a binary measure in Google - so a big red X against your brand).

Make these changes and you could see results quickly. The text generated, URLs cited, and brands mentioned in AI results change fast - so prepare for volatility.

Fan-out queries

A new angle for AI content marketing concerns the "fan-out query". Google and other AI systems, when presented with a query, fan it out into multiple related sub-queries. So for example, if you ask the AI engine for the best bread flour for sourdough, it may also look up (and return) questions and answers like 'What's the best flour for a sourdough starter?', 'What are the best bread flour brands', 'How much should I feed my sourdough?' and more.

Interestingly, a study of 173,902 URLs by SurferSEO found that sites with content that ranks across fan-out queries are 161% more likely to be cited in the final AI return than those which rank only for the original search term (despite this being what the users actually searched for).

So, don't focus on specific keywords or trying to rank for individual citations or queries. Broad content that covers multiple aspects of the target topic stands a much better chance of being included in AI results.

In short, theme content around topic clusters, not keywords.

Measurement

If you want to measure actual AI impressions, there are some tools available. Whilst the likes of ChatGPT rarely offer their own Google Analytics-style proprietary data solution, there are others on the market - such as Bing Webmaster Tools (now positioning itself as a GEO offering as a key differentiator), Wellows AI Overviews Tracker and Ahrefs Site Explorer.

Remember, AI's volatility and ever-changing results (even for identical queries) mean that it's no longer about appearing in results for specific queries. A much better question to ask is: "Across many and varied prompts, how often does AI connect my brand with this topic or category?"

Outside of the above tools you can use Google Analytics to track AI referral traffic.

Create a new Channel Group (there are many guides online for how to do this) to collate site visits from the various AI sources so you can see them at-a-glance and track trends over time. This can also help you drill down into behavioural differences when AI users are on site.

AI users typically spend longer on a site but visit fewer pages as they've often developed - or already had - a deeper knowledge on one area than other visitors frequently higher up the funnel.

The growing differences between impressions and clicks has become a true marker of the AI analytics world. Search Console data gives you impressions figures for how many people are seeing your content, even if they aren't clicking through. It also pulls through impressions delivered via AIOs - and this may be the best metric to monitor going forward, as it shows interest in your product/service at a time when clicks are dropping.

Tips and takeaways

Use AI for:

Keyword research. (If you have SEO tools then continue using these as they'll be better quality, but if not then AI results can provide decent results for no financial outlay.)

Content rewrites and optimization. (See it as a guide and steer, nothing more, but note that AI is particularly good on metadata, not just your on-page content.)

SEO audits - though, as noted above, AI can learn from bad advice as well as best practice so exercise caution. A good prompt provided by Granicus is: "Analyse this site [URL] for anything SEO related. Give me the strengths and weaknesses, including technical data and areas where new content can be added. Also provide ideas on new content topics. Do all this from the perspective of an SEO expert, providing highly detailed responses."

When writing prompts, keep types separate - i.e. don't mix a content prompt with a metadata one. Keep them separate to ensure the AI engine provides the kind of response you're looking for. It keeps quality high and ensures responses remains relevant.

Ask for multiple variations, especially with content generation. You can choose your favourite or combine the best of multiple responses.

Request AI ask you questions - it will learn from this and identify places to find out more detail that you may not have considered.

Keep to the same chat where possible, or use the same login, as AI systems learn as they go and so will provide better, more relevant results with time.

Digital marketing actions:

Write in a way that is confident, clear, unambiguous and straightforward. Answer the query directly and get your key information across early.

Find out what makes you unique then promote and celebrate this.

Ensure your content is well organised and scannable. Content structure and formatting are direct levers of AI visibility, so use the existing best practice for content structures (H1, H2, H3 etc.).

Publish free tools, first-hand research, how-to guides, expert interviews, and FAQs. These answer questions.

Implement answer-oriented or atomic writing, with one idea per section.

Update old content - ChatGPT actually has a URL freshness score which creates a kind of recency bias. Plus, updated website content ensures your citations are more accurate too.

Fix, build and influence. Fixing involves correcting misinformation or anything outdated, building is expanding on existing content to fill gaps, and influencing is about strengthening relationships with the authoritative resources and AI engines already use.

Consider a change in metrics used for KPIs. You may want to switch from clicks to impressions, engaged time, engaged sessions or conversions. This may also take the form of rethinking marketing strategies, to redefine your success metrics, prioritising quality and authenticity - as these lead to brand authority and awareness.

Forget about word count targets - content should be as long as it needs to be.

Actively seek out high authority mentions. They work and you only need a handful to be included in AI results.

Use social media, newsletters and other avenues for multi-channel engagement. If clicks through are the ultimate end goal, consider utilising more social and paid media campaigns to drive traffic.

If you ask customers where they found you, add 'AI' to the answer deck.

As always, write for humans. Engagement is the first signal and anything that is made solely for machines won't get traffic (and therefore won't send the signals that influence search visibility in the first place).

And finally...

One of the most important factors if you want to be cited in AI (which I've broken all the rules by putting last) is to ensure AI engines can actually access your content.

If ChatGPT and the like cannot crawl your site then very little of the above will actually matter.

Check your robots.txt for AI crawler blocks to ensure you're not accidentally stopping AI or search crawlers from reaching your content. This is especially pertinent if you're using Cloudflare, as Ahrefs notes that 5.89% of all websites with it are blocking GPTBot (and that many may be doing so unwittingly).

Tools and resources:

Google Analytics, Search Console and Trends

AlsoAsked

AnswerThePublic

Qforia

Schema Validator or Google's Rich Results Test tool

Bing Webmaster Tools

Wellows AI Overview Tracker

Looking ahead/What's next?

It's a fool's errand to try and look too far into the future of AI, but some of the above trends and developments can give a clue as to where things may go in the short- to medium-term.

First up, zero click really means it. Search could well move to become a fully conversational interface, where getting a click becomes the exception, not the rule. How Google squares this with its traditional model is yet to be seen, but all the trends are pointing in this direction.

Monetisation and bias could also become a consideration - and open new revenue streams. Remember, AI models still have to be created, and one of the original brickbats used against them was that they frequently reflected the biases of their creators. AI creators may eventually turn this to their advantage, with opportunities for more (or more favourable) coverage available for those willing to pay.

Finally there's the aforementioned Agentic AI. This is AI that can take initiative - making decisions, completing actions and carrying out tasks, rather than simply replying to prompts. It would transform AI from a knowledgeable friend into a digital assistant - and could be seismic for the tourism industry. Agentic AI would be the travel agent, tour guide and booking engine all rolled into one.

Cited researchers

The following undertook research or delivered training which has been cited in the above whitepaper. We thank them for providing useful data and expertise.

McKinsey

A global management consulting firm founded that has been advising businesses, governments, and organizations for 100 years.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/>

KPMG

A multinational professional services network, and one of the Big Four accounting firms, which is based in the UK.

<https://kpmg.com/>

Ahrefs

An AI marketing platform that is powered by big data. A long-standing SEO company with large amounts of first-hand research.

<https://ahrefs.com/>

TechCrunch

An online news resource focusing on the technology and startup industries.

<https://techcrunch.com/>

OpenAI

An early mover in the AI world and creator of ChatGPT.

<https://openai.com/>

University of Melbourne

A public research university that has been ranked top in all of Australia.

<https://www.unimelb.edu.au/>

Adobe

Creator of a range of web design tools, including Photoshop, Acrobat, Lightroom and more.

<https://www.adobe.com/>

Barna

A research company specifically focusing on the trends affecting faith, culture and ministry.

<https://www.barna.com/>

Forrester

A leading global market research company with a portfolio of large global businesses.

<https://www.forrester.com/bold/>

Exploding Topics

A news resource from Semrush, providing comprehensive insights on emerging trends, markets, and opportunities.

<https://explodingtopics.com/>

Pew

A public opinion polling and data-driven social science research company.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/>

Authoritas

An SEO software provider specialising in eCommerce.

<https://www.authoritas.com/>

iPullRank

A US-based enterprise and mid-market SEO agency.

<https://ipullrank.com/>

BrightEdge

An enterprise SEO platform focusing on AI search visibility.

<https://www.brightedge.com/>

Granicus

A 'citizen experience platform' for governments and public sector organisations.

<https://granicus.com/uk/>

Google

The world's most widely used search engine, with a suite of other applications covering maps, email and more.

<https://www.google.com/>

SparkToro

An audience research platform that provides insight to large and small businesses.

<https://sparktoro.com/>

New York Times

Manhattan-based newspaper that is one of the longest running in the US.

<https://www.nytimes.com/>

Daniel Foley Carter

An SEO specialist who has worked with medium and large global brands.

<https://www.danielfoley.co.uk/>

Similarweb

A provider of digital data intelligence solutions, specialising in mobile app and web analytics, web traffic, digital performance, SEO and AI optimization.

<https://www.similarweb.com/>

ALM Corp

A digital marketing company covering SEO, PPC and social media marketing.

<https://almcorp.com/>

Growth Memo

A news resource by Kevin Indig delivering research-backed insights on SEO, organic, and AI-driven search for senior marketing leaders.

<https://www.growth-memo.com/>

SurferSEO

An optimisation platform used to research, audit, write, optimize and generate SEO-friendly content.

<https://surferseo.com/>

"The decline in organic traffic is a challenging reality, but it pushes us toward a more meaningful measure of success – one based on true influence, authority, and engagement." Granicus