Report: The Impact of AI on Search, Discovery and Content Strategy 2025-2028

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Executive Summary

AI is steadily transforming how people search for information online, creating both challenges and opportunities for businesses. In the near-term, businesses following best practices in 'traditional SEO' and content marketing are well placed to continue to perform well in the new landscape, but the inevitable changes in the search environment will require all businesses to adapt accordingly.

This report analyses the current and projected impact of AI on search behaviour, outlines strategic responses, and provides recommendations for maintaining and enhancing online visibility in an AI-driven search landscape.

Key findings include:

- The rise of AI search assistants as alternatives to traditional search engines
- AI-generated overviews replacing conventional search result clicks
- The need for create and optimise content that search engines and AI systems recognise as authoritative and trustworthy
- The need to engage with authoritative and trusted collaborators and media partners
- Using AI as a tool for content creation in line with best practices.
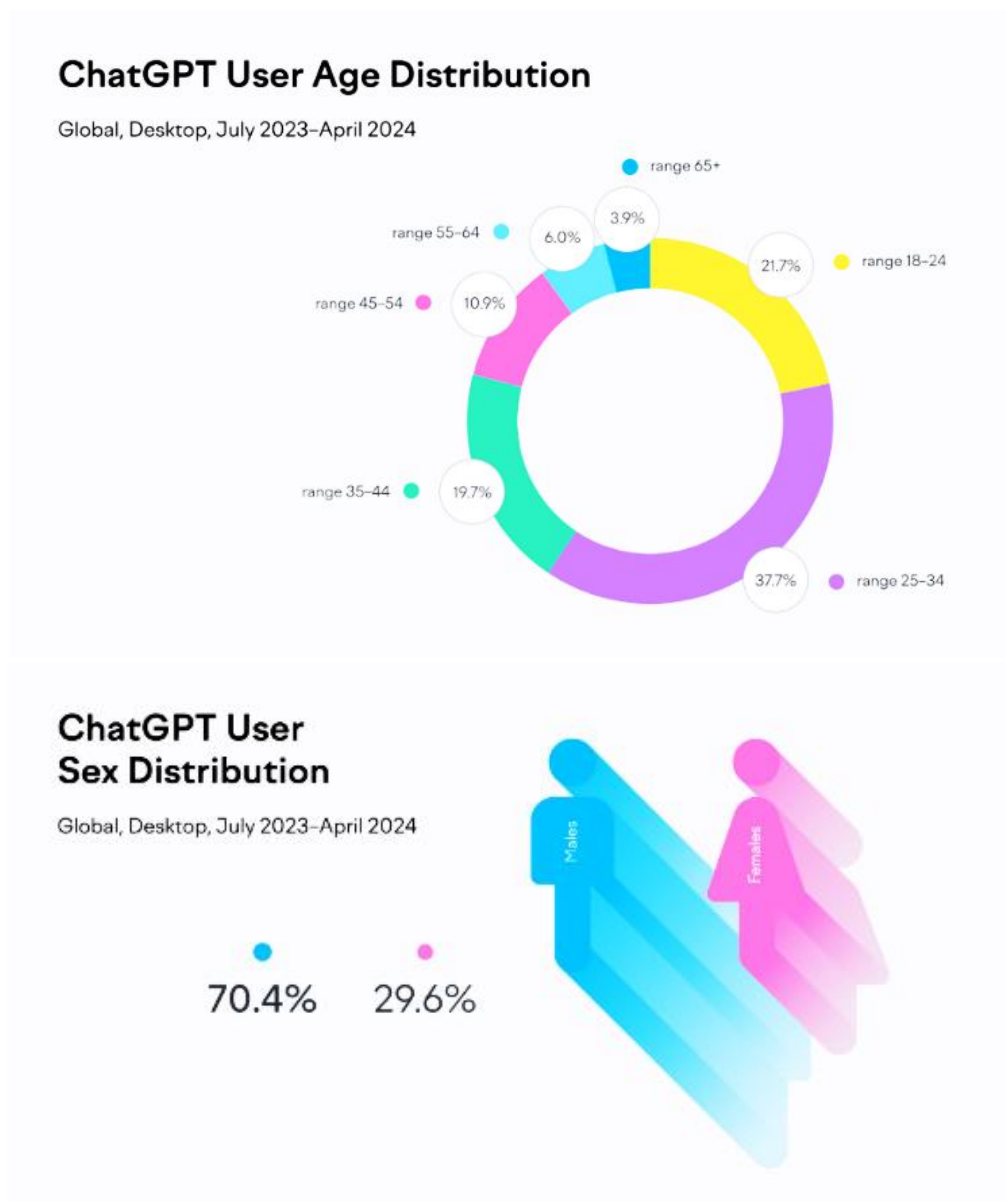
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1. Current State of AI in Search

AI Search Assistants

The emergence of AI tools has begun to reshape search behaviours. While traditional search engines remain dominant, a growing segment of users are turning to AI tools for answers. This trend is particularly notable among younger demographics, males and early technology adopters:

ChatGPT User Age Distribution

Global, Desktop, July 2023–April 2024

- range 65+ : 3.9%
- range 55-64 : 6.0%
- range 45-54 : 10.9%
- range 35-44 : 19.7%
- range 25-34 : 37.7%
- range 18-24 : 21.7%

ChatGPT User Sex Distribution

Global, Desktop, July 2023–April 2024

Males: 70.4%   Females: 29.6%

Source: SEMRush Trends

As of February 2025, the amount of referral traffic to SMB websites from AI sources has been estimated at just 1.25% of the organic traffic volume, although this represents a growth of 123% over the previous 6 months.

A [recent report by SEMRush and Statista](#) stated that in 2023, 13 million US adults nominated generative AI as their primary tool for online search, and predicted it will grow seven-fold to 90 million by 2027.

AI-Enhanced Search Experiences

Major search engines have integrated AI assistants directly into their interfaces, providing summarised overviews above traditional results.

Hard data on website traffic from this type of source is not readily available as traditional tracking tools such as Google Analytics report this traffic as coming from Organic Search. SEO tracking tools are starting to roll out AI overview tracking capabilities and these will be incorporated into my regular reporting when available.

However it is well documented that the rate of zero-click searches has increased as a result of this. Around 60% of Google searches now result in no click-throughs to websites, with users getting answers from AI overviews, featured snippets, knowledge panels and other enhancements.

The major search engines using AI overviews in their search results now also include references and links to source sites, rolled out following trust and 'hallucination' issues with early implementations of the feature. These are potential sources of high quality website traffic.

Voice Search Evolution

AI has dramatically improved voice search capabilities, further changing search patterns and leading to rapid growth in conversational-style search queries.
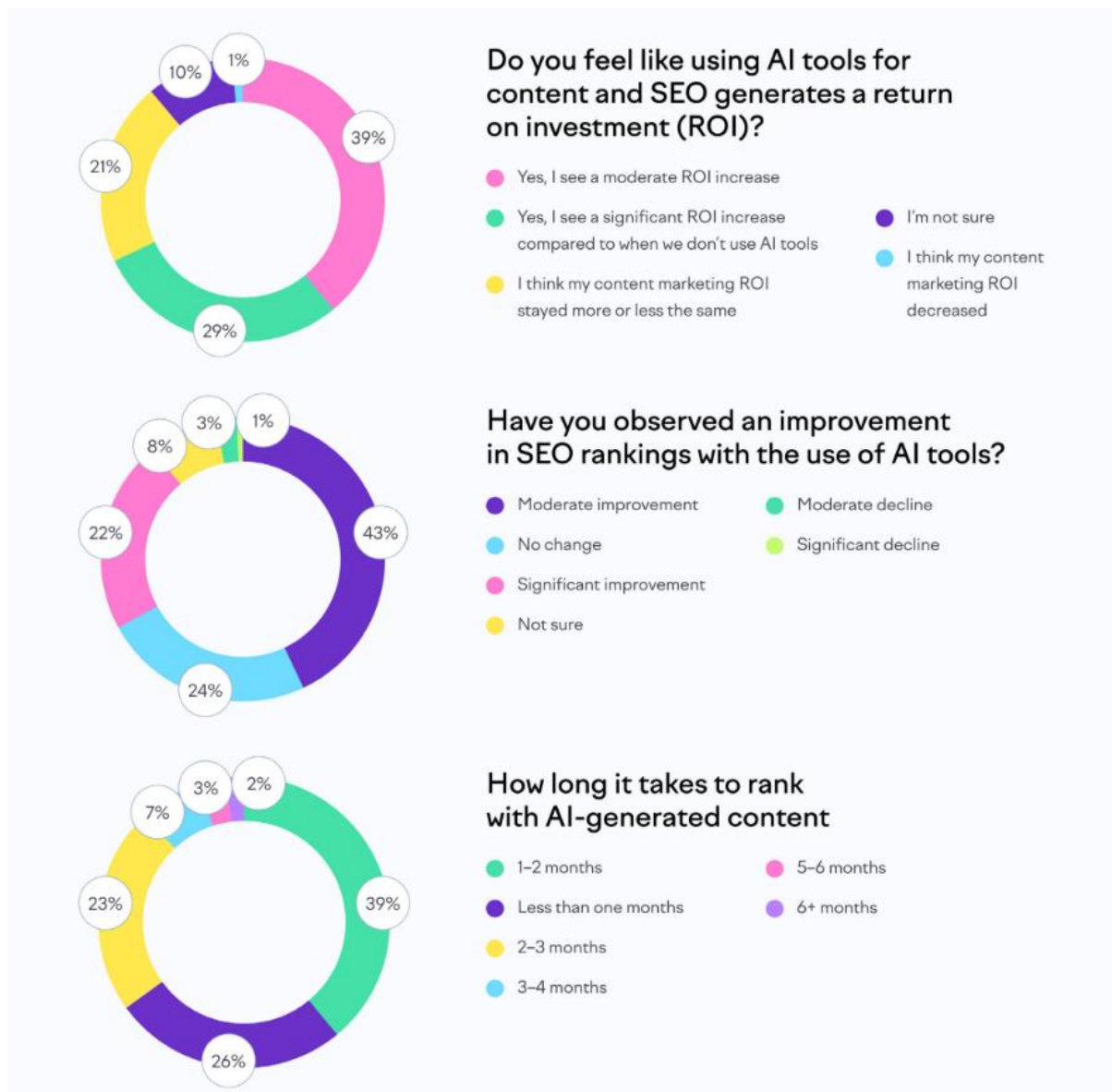
AI For Content Creation

The report by SEMRush & Statista quoted earlier also referenced a recent worldwide study that surveyed 2600 businesses on their use of generative AI for content marketing and SEO:

Expected Benefits from Generative AI in Organizations

Global, 2024

Benefit	%
Researching content and topic ideas	58%
Rewriting and paraphrasing text	52%
Writing content from scratch	50%
Creating a content marketing strategy	47%
Expanding text—adding more content and ideas	40%
Creating content outlines	39%
Optimizing copy for target keywords	33%
Audience research	30%
Improving the copy's readability	29%
Creating content briefs	27%
Improving the copy's tone of voice	26%
Writing meta tags	23%
Optimizing written content for a specific audience	23%
Creating visual content (images, video)	23%
Avoiding plagiarism	20%
Grouping and clustering keywords	16%
Content localization and translation	9%

Do you feel like using AI tools for content and SEO generates a return on investment (ROI)?

- Yes, I see a moderate ROI increase
- Yes, I see a significant ROI increase compared to when we don't use AI tools
- I think my content marketing ROI stayed more or less the same
- I'm not sure
- I think my content marketing ROI decreased

39%, 29%, 21%, 10%, 1%

Have you observed an improvement in SEO rankings with the use of AI tools?

- Moderate improvement
- No change
- Significant improvement
- Not sure
- Moderate decline
- Significant decline

43%, 24%, 22%, 8%, 3%, 1%

How long it takes to rank with AI-generated content

- 1–2 months
- Less than one months
- 2–3 months
- 3–4 months
- 5–6 months
- 6+ months

39%, 26%, 23%, 7%, 3%, 2%

In this landscape it is inevitable that your business competitors will be using AI in content creation and the leaders in that area will develop a competitive advantage in the quantity and quality of the content they can create. There are certainly concerns about accuracy of AI generated content but with appropriate human control this can be managed.

2. Projected Changes: Near-Term (1 Year)

Search Behaviour Shifts

Within the next 12 months, I expect to see:

- **Reduction in clicks across all search types**: For informational queries, AI-generated answers will increasingly satisfy user needs without requiring clicks to source websites. Some sources predict up to 40% reduction in clicks.

- **Replacement of 'ten blue links' search results with AI results**: Google announced 'AI Mode' at its I/O Developer Conference in May 2025; this is available in the US now and in Australia soon. For many search types, this type of AI result will replace 'traditional' search results, further reducing click-throughs to websites.

- **Voice search increase:** As users adapt to using voice search across mobiles and smart devices, it will steadily increase on desktop devices. It is currently available for Google Chrome and Bing users.

- **Query complexity increase**: Average search query length will extend as users adapt to voice search and AI's ability to understand natural language and complex questions. This will likely spread to searches within traditional search engines as users increasingly adopt voice-based search and/or adopt a more conversational search style.

- **Visual search integration**: AI-powered visual search will grow in popularity, with users conducting searches using images of spaces they admire.

Content Consumption Changes

- **Skimmable AI Summaries**: Users will increasingly rely on AI-generated overviews of search results, using AI to 'curate' potential websites to streamline their search process.

- **Source Verification**: As AI-generated overviews and AI assistant usage become more frequent, sites that structure content in an AI-friendly way and focus on building authoritativeness and trust will gain both more visibility and click throughs from these AI-generated results.

- **Multi-Format Content Preference**: AI systems will increasingly highlight content that exists across multiple formats (text, video, image, interactive) based on engagement data with those content types across different types of searches (e.g. informational, 'how-to', commercial, inspiration-seeking etc).

3. Projected Changes: Mid-Term (3 Years)

By 2028, potential changes include:

Search Ecosystem Transformation

- **AI-First Search Interfaces**: Major shift from link-based search results to conversational, multimodal AI interactions becoming the default.

- **Specialised Knowledge Graphs**: Industry-specific AI knowledge bases may emerge, with domain experts contributing to their development. These will be primary data sources for AI models.

- **Personalised, Predictive Search**: AI systems will increasingly anticipate a user's information needs based on previous interactions and the project phase.

B2B Purchase Journey Evolution

- **Extended Research Phase**: AI tools will facilitate more thorough pre-contact research, with prospects arriving at first contact with sophisticated understanding. Website

structured data detailing project scopes, services provided and even products used will allow users to search for, and AI systems to deliver, information on service providers with very specific capabilities.

- **Decision Support Systems**: Corporate clients will employ AI systems to evaluate fitout proposals and compare vendors.

4. Recommendations

Content Strategy Adaptation

Expertise Demonstration

Building up the profiles of your content authors as genuine Subject Matter Experts is an important long term strategy that will pay off through the perception of Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness. This E-E-A-T, as it's known, has been a key ranking factor for years and will be even more crucial in the AI era.

Here are some ways to do that:

- Ensure all blog content is attributed to specific authors
- Review author profiles to ensure they accurately state the experience, expertise and credentials of each person
- Authors should post on LinkedIn with a link to their article when it is published
- Add schema markup to author pages on your site to help AIs and search engines understand and interpret the content quickly.

Other best practices to boost visibility in AI searches include:

- Where appropriate, include quotes, statistics and links to authoritative third-party sites within website content as this has been shown to increase AI visibility by 30-40%
- Develop deep, authoritative content addressing specific challenges that your target market experiences
- Consider implementing a digital PR program to develop relationships with mainstream and industry media to build up a presence for both your brand and individual subject matter experts.
- Incorporate original research and exclusive data points that AI systems will recognise as unique and valuable. Also great fodder for the PR program mentioned above.

Format Diversification

Developing content across different formats (text, audio, video, images, graphics etc) will become increasingly important as AI assistants deliver information to their users in the formats best suited to the search type.

- AI-powered image-based search is on the rise. Ensure that image assets follow best practices for accessibility and searchability when prepared and uploaded to the site
- Incorporate video wherever available. Videos are appearing increasingly in AI overviews for certain types of searches, are AI-searchable (both visual and spoken content) and get high click through rates

- Ensure that video assets follow best practices for accessibility and searchability when prepared and uploaded to your site or video platforms like YouTube. Use appropriate keywords and relevant subject matter expert names in descriptions when sharing video content on these platforms and social media

Content Creation

A key lens when considering what content to develop is *User Intent*. Your potential customers will be using AI tools to research varied aspects of the challenges they need to address and the products and services that will potentially help them.

Your content needs to be providing that information in an engaging and comprehensive way, following the best practices outline above.

- Focus on creating content that provides value to the user and addresses their specific needs
- Use AI internally to speed up content creation, but always human-edit for nuance, brand tone, and accuracy.
- Organise content into comprehensive topic clusters around key service areas – i.e. hub/pillar pages.
- Cross link between your website articles, your socials, author socials, and 3rd party sites like industry hubs.
- Collaborate with other industry thought leaders to create content for yoursite, their site, industry sites and social media

Technical stuff for AI optimisation

It's crucial that your website is set up to 'feed' the AI bots in a way that ensures they get the key info in the short amount of time they spend on your site each visit:

- Integrate structured data markup to help AI systems understand your content faster and interpret it correctly, from your Home page through to Services pages, Product pages, Author pages, FAQs and more.
- Ensure key information is presented as early as possible on the page to ensure it is 'read' by AI bots before timeout occurs
- Structure pages logically using clear headings, logical content flow, bullet points
- Use declarative headings that directly answer likely queries
- Implement a table of contents for longer pieces
- Add FAQ content on pages and blog posts using FAQ schema as per above, writing questions and answers in a conversational style.

Appendix

Best practices for images on website for AI searchability and visibility

File format: .jpg, .webp for photographic images, .png for graphics

File size: Proportional to image dimensions, no larger than 300kb for a 1920x800 image. This corresponds roughly to a 75% quality level for .jpg files.

File name: This has always been important for SEO. It is now increasingly important for AI-based image searches. Should be short and include keywords where possible

Alt text: As above, vital for AI systems. Descriptive of image, using keywords naturally

Best practices for video on website for AI searchability and visibility

File format: Should be .mp4 - Don't use .mov as some browsers don't support it.

File size: Ideally under 30MB for website use but dependant on length & resolution. Ask your video producers to optimise formatting for web; most experienced producers will nail this.

File name: Short and using keywords where appropriate

Captions: If required these can be added within your web or video platform by creating and uploading a VTT file, or, more simply, added by the video producers. Especially helpful as many people watch videos with the sound off in work environments.

Text Overlays: Text overlays of key points can aid both user understanding and AI processing of the content.

File details: Within many web and online video platforms you can add titles, descriptions and keywords that are read by search and AI bots to help them understand the content and context of the video.