Second Edition 2026

State of AI Search Report



exposure ninja

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The State of AI Search... One Year On

A year ago, we opened the first edition of this report with a moment from the stage at MozCon London. While presenting *How to Dominate AI Search in 2025*, I asked the room of 300 SEOs and marketers to raise a hand if they had actively worked to appear in ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google's AI Overviews, or other generative answer platforms.

Fewer than 3% did.

That moment became the catalyst for the first edition of the State of AI Search. AI Search was already changing how people discover, compare and decide, and almost no one was acting on it.

Twelve months on, nearly half of US adults have now used an AI chatbot, and 60% have read an AI-generated summary at the top of their search results.

In the UK, 59% of adults used generative AI in the last three months. And Google's AI Mode, a US-only experiment when we last wrote, reached more than 200 countries, including the UK, within seven months.

One thing is clear: AI Search is no longer something you can afford to avoid. The question isn't whether to act, but how to do it.



Charlie Marchant
CEO of Exposure Ninja

Executive Summary

One year on from our first edition, AI-assisted information-seeking has become mainstream in the US, while broad generative-AI use is now widespread in the UK

But the same evidence that confirms the dominance of AI Search also dispels the more dramatic claims made across the industry this year. Conventional search has not collapsed. Autonomous AI shopping is still in its early stages. And despite increased adoption of AI Search tools, overall trust remains low.

The defining development of the year was Google AI Mode. The conversational search experience that moved from a US-only Labs experiment in March 2025 to a roll out of more than 200 countries, including the UK, within seven months.

Five Key Statistics Defining AI Search in 2026

49%

of US adults have used an AI chatbot, up from 33% in 2024. 24% now use one daily (Pew, February 2026).

60%

of US adults have read an AI summary in search results. AI answers now reach a majority even among people who never open a chatbot (Pew).

8%

of users click a traditional search result when an AI Overview is present, down from 15%. However, just 1% click on links in AI summaries. (Pew metered panel).

2.5bn

monthly AI Overview users and over 1 billion AI Mode users (Google, May 2026).

42%

better conversion rates from AI-referred US retail traffic. In 2025, non-AI traffic converted 38% better. (Adobe, March 2026).

THE HEADLINE

AI Search is a commercial and increasingly measurable channel, but it is used alongside conventional search, not instead of it.

The key takeaway is not to panic about disappearing clicks but to win citations, measure the influence that AI Search is having long before a conversion, and and to keep your organic foundation strong.

Traditional SEO still drives discovery and sales, and the same authority signals that improve ranking support AI visibility too.

Where We Were: 2025 in Brief

1

In our 2025 edition of the State of AI Search, we reported the overall AI landscape and made several predictions about how it would continue to evolve and adapt through 2026.
So, did our predictions pan out?

Our 2026 Predictions

What We Predicted	How It Played Out
Continued decline of organic traffic. Semrush projected that AI Search visitors would overtake traditional search visitors by 2028, sooner if Google made AI Mode the default. With rising adoption and in-platform shopping such as ChatGPT's Instant Checkout, we expected 2026 to be marked by the continued decline of organic traffic.	**Real decline, but not a collapse.** The click loss is real, anecdotally and backed by data. With an AI Overview present, users click a traditional result 8% of the time versus 15% without one, and aggregate AI Overview click-through rate recovered from 1.3% in December 2025 to 2.4% by February 2026. Organic traffic has not fallen away, and AI referrals still account for a small share of visits.
The rise of pay-to-play AI visibility. Perplexity had been testing Sponsored Questions since late 2024; Google had confirmed ads were coming to AI Mode; and even OpenAI, once critical of advertising in generative AI, was reportedly exploring an ad-supported ChatGPT. We read these as signs of a commercial future mirroring traditional SERPs, where organic blends with paid visibility.	**Rolling out, but not everywhere.** Paid placements are live in Microsoft CoPilot, and Google runs ads in AI Overviews and is testing AI Mode formats. OpenAI has moved from exploring advertising to running ads in ChatGPT, with plans to expand into further markets, including the UK. However, Perplexity has gone in a different direction, phasing out the Sponsored Questions experiment it began running in 2024. The AI Search company also has no current plans to bring ads back, citing concerns over user trust and response integrity, saying that users need to believe they are receiving the best possible answer and may have doubts when ads appear. This concern is backed by data: an Ipsos survey of over 1,000 US adults found that 63% trust AI answers less when they see ads.

Where We Were: 2025 in Brief

1

What We Predicted

Your new buyer: agentic AI.

Agentic AI makes decisions and purchases on a user's behalf. With Salesforce data showing 24% of consumers and 32% of Gen Z already comfortable with AI agents shopping for them, we expected the behaviour to grow rapidly in 2026. A study found AI agents favour structured data and keyword relevance over visual appeal, so we argued brands would need to adapt their PPC strategies for algorithmic buyers, not just humans.

How It Played Out

The tools are here, but adoption isn't widespread.

Product discovery and native checkout are now live across ChatGPT, Google and Perplexity, and Visa has reported hundreds of controlled, agent-initiated transactions. But adoption remains limited: only 11% of users are willing to let AI make the final purchase decision, even in lower-risk categories, and just 5% report having used an autonomous agent to place an order.

Our previous argument still holds: AI agents reward machine legibility, meaning accurate product feeds, attributes and transaction endpoints matter more than they used to. But, crucially, structured data cannot replace visual appeal. To be chosen by an agent, brands still need the human signals of imagery, reviews and trust alongside the machine-readable ones. Much of the current reluctance comes down to trust in the agent itself. Before people hand over the final decision, they need confidence that it will buy the right thing at the right price, without mistakes, and without ever completing a purchase they did not approve.

2

AI-Assisted Information Seeking Enters the Mainstream

The clearest change since the first edition is that AI-assisted information seeking is now a normal behaviour for a large share of the population, supported by representative surveys rather than relying on vendor panels alone.

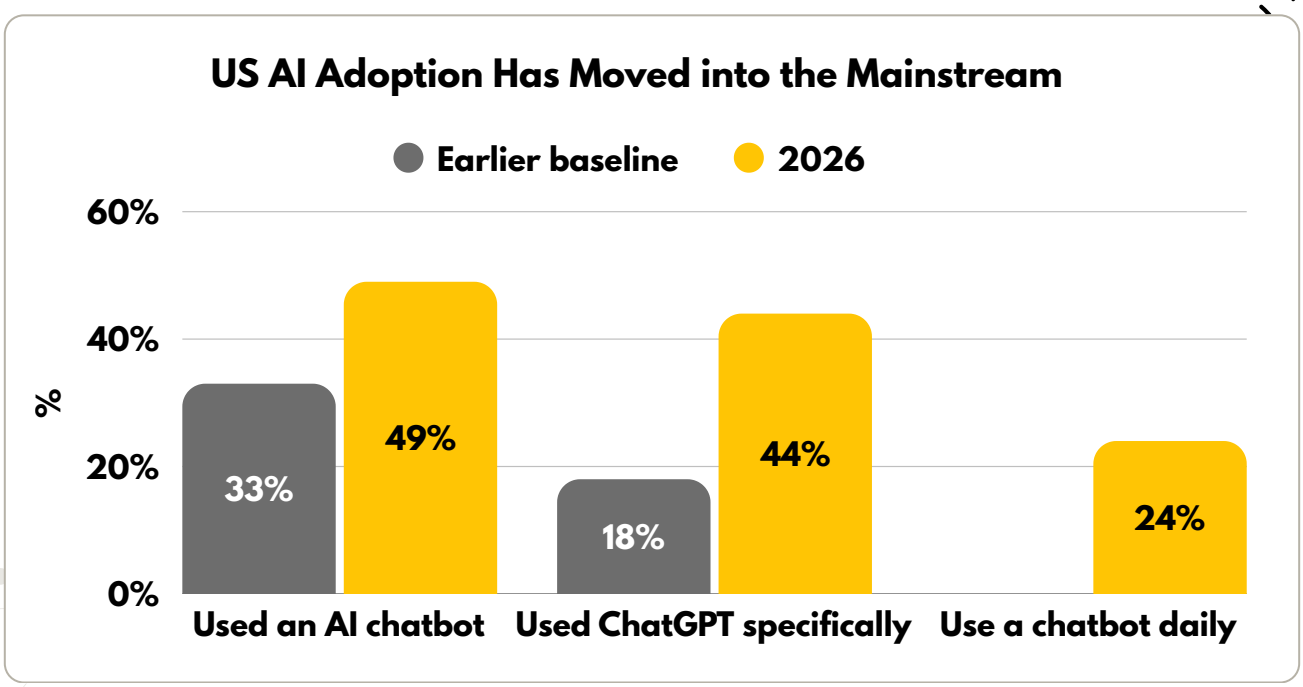
The United States

NEARLY HALF OF ADULTS (AND RISING)

Pew Research Center's representative survey of 5,119 US adults (February 2026) found that 49% have used an AI chatbot, up from 33% in 2024, and 24% now use one daily.

Reported use of ChatGPT has climbed from 18% in 2023 to 44% in 2026. Crucially, 42% of adults say they use chatbots for information, demonstrating that AI use is increasingly a search behaviour, rather than being a novelty.

Just as significant is the exposure to AI inside conventional search. 60% of US adults say they have read an AI summary at the top of their results, extending AI's reach beyond the population that actively chooses to open a chatbot.



The United Kingdom

BROAD ADOPTION OF GENERATIVE AI, BUT SHARP GENERATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL DIVIDES

The UK government's DSIT Public Engagement Survey, an address-based sample of 30,698 adults including offline households, found that 59% of UK adults used at least one form of generative AI in the previous three months. Among those users, 75% used it at least weekly, and 35% used it daily.

However, adoption is steeply stratified across age and education. The survey found that at least three-quarters of under-45s and degree holders had used generative AI, compared with just 19% of individuals with no qualifications. Differences by location are less pronounced, with usage ranging from 69% in London to 51% in the North East.

Importantly, the UK government survey measured generative AI (including image and search tools) broadly, so these figures shouldn't be compared like-for-like to the US data. Reuters' 48-market study shows far more conservative adoption. Weekly use of a standalone chatbot for news puts the UK in last place at 4%, with no year-on-year increase. One likely driver is perceived trustworthiness: the same study found that trust in AI news answers sat at just 6% in the UK (again, the lowest of any market), versus 20% globally.

AI Usage in the Workplace

Frequent workplace AI use in the United States rose from 11% in 2023 to 30% by May 2026, though that measures all AI use in a person's role, not AI Search specifically. Across markets, only 1% of people name AI as their main source of news. This supports a consistent pattern: AI is complementing, but not completely replacing, existing workflows (at least, not yet). People are folding AI into a broader toolkit that still includes search engines, review sites, retailers and human advisers, rather than abandoning a particular platform in favour of AI.

30% **of US workers use AI frequently in their roles.**

59% **of UK adults use at least one form of generative AI.**

Adoption is real and no longer arguable, but generative AI is being layered onto existing research behaviour rather than replacing it. The risk for brands is not that customers vanish into a chatbot; it is that AI is becoming another meaningful influence on decisions, often before conventional analytics can see it. For brands, that makes visibility across AI-assisted research journeys increasingly important.

AI Overviews and the Rise of AI Mode

3

If one development defines the year for search marketers, it is Google's expansion of generative answers and the arrival of AI Mode as a full conversational search experience.

The Rollout of AI Overviews and AI Mode

Date	Milestone
May 2024	AI Overviews launches in the US following Google's 2023 Search Generative Experience (SGE).
March 2025	AI Mode is announced as a US Search Labs experiment.
May 2025	AI Overviews expand to 200+ countries and territories.
July 2025	AI Mode reaches the UK.
October 2025	AI Mode expands to 200+ countries and territories.
May 2026	Google reports 2.5bn+ AI Overview and 1bn+ AI Mode monthly users.

AI adoption in the US is among the strongest globally, likely reflecting, in part, its longer period of exposure to generative AI and the relative maturity of AI Search. That makes the US evidence useful as an indication of what later-stage adoption could look like elsewhere.

But it should not be treated as a direct forecast: markets are likely to follow different paths according to their own search behaviours, levels of trust and patterns of technology adoption. UK and US studies also use different questions and populations, making direct comparisons between individual figures difficult.

How Common Are AI Overviews?

Prevalence is the single most misreported statistic in AI Search, because it depends entirely on which keywords you measure. For a more accurate picture, it is better represented as a range than a single headline figure:

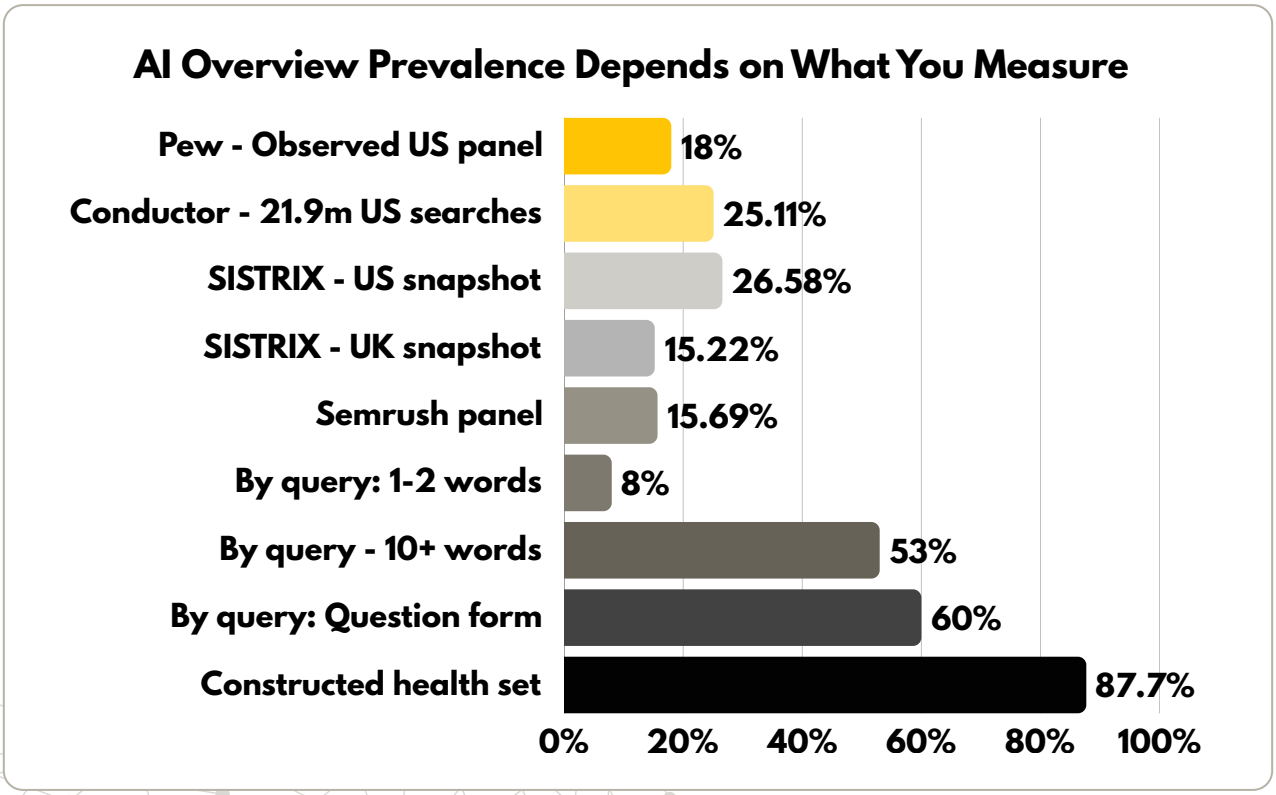
- 18% of real searches produced an AI Overview in an observed US browsing panel, and 58% of people saw at least one (Pew, March 2025). This gives us one of the clearest measures of real-world prevalence because it tracks actual searches rather than a set of predefined keywords.

- 25.11% of 21.9 million US searches triggered an AI Overview in Conductor's late-2025 index. But Semrush's year-end study shows how quickly that figure can change. An assessment of 10 million keywords saw the prevalence shift from 6.49% to 24.61%, then back to 15.69% throughout 2025.

- Query length and format make a significant difference. AI Overviews appeared in 8% of one- to-two-word searches, rising to 53% for searches of ten words or more and 60% for question-form searches (Pew). In one constructed health dataset, prevalence reached 87.7%.

The UK–US gap shows up again in **SISTRIX**'s like-for-like snapshot on 1 August 2025, which found AI Overviews in 26.58% of US search results and 15.22% of UK search results.

At that point, the feature had been live in the UK for only a few months, compared with more than a year in the US, so the difference may reflect rollout timing, dataset composition, and genuine market variation.

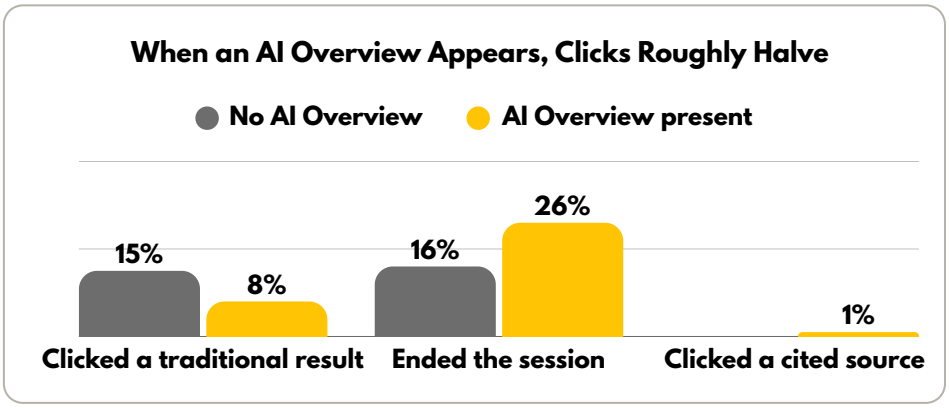


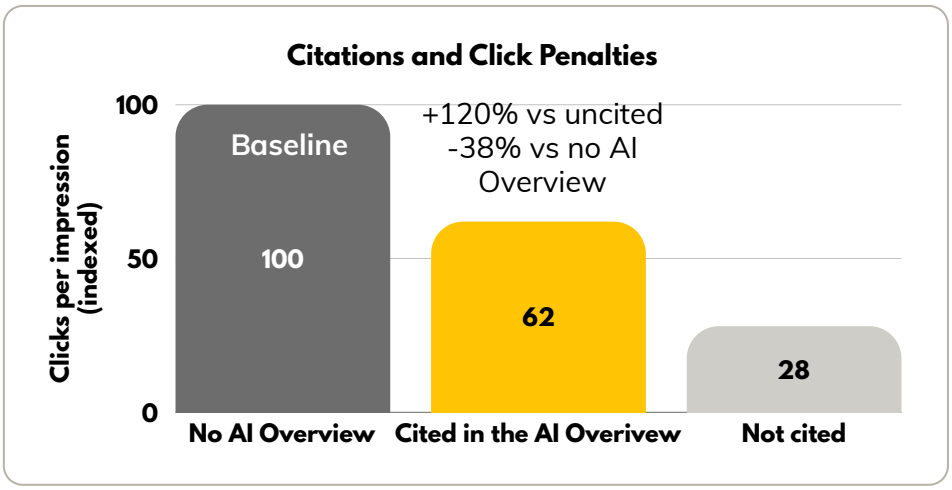
How AI Overviews Affect Clicks

Pew's metered panel gives us one of the clearest views of what US users actually did after a search. An analysis of nearly 69,000 searches found that when an AI Overview appeared, users clicked a traditional result 8% of the time, compared with 15% when one did not. Users clicked a source cited in an AI Overview in just 1% of cases, and, overall, were more likely to end their session when an AI Overview was present (26% versus 16%).

These conclusions are contributing to industry headlines about zero-click searches and the collapse of click-through rates, but the full picture is more nuanced. Seer's analysis of 53 brands shows that not all AI Overviews have the same effect on clicks. Their report found that a cited brand earned 120% more clicks per impression than an uncited one (though still 38% fewer than when no Overview appeared).

The same analysis also found that overall click-through rates when an AI Overview was present changed over time, falling to 1.3% in December 2025 before recovering to 2.4% by February 2026.





Citation, therefore, reduced the click loss associated with AI Overviews, but did not remove it, while the wider trend shows that click-through rates are fluctuating rather than simply continuing to fall.

AI Mode has made search more conversational, while AI Overviews increasingly answer the query directly on the results page. For brands, that means tracking how often AI Overviews appear across the queries that matter to you, alongside whether your brand is cited when they do. Citation adds another visibility goal to traditional ranking, but it does not replace it.

What AI Search Cites, and How Often It Changes

If citation now matters alongside ranking, it raises three questions:

- What do AI systems cite?
- How much does traditional ranking still matter?
- How stable are citations?

The answers are less clear-cut than they are in conventional search.

Ranking Matters But Does Not Determine Citation

Ahrefs' March 2026 analysis found that 37.1% of URLs cited in AI Overviews ranked in the organic top ten for the same query, while roughly the same proportion did not rank in the top 100 at all. Conventional SEO strength clearly helps, but it does not determine citation on its own. Query fan-out, which expands a search into multiple related sub-queries, means AI answers can cite pages that rank for those related questions rather than the original search.

Citations Change Frequently

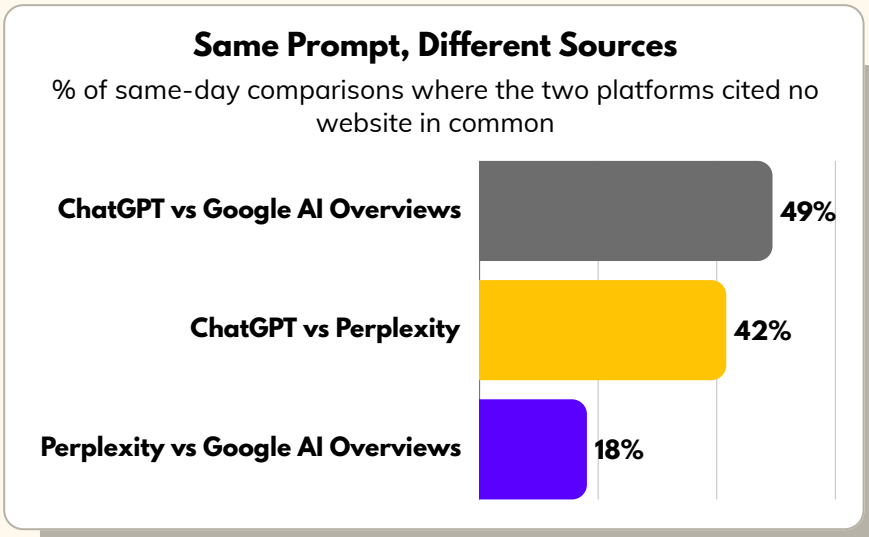
A single screenshot showing a brand citation tells you very little about whether it will still be there the next time you check. SISTRIX's 17-week study across six countries found that AI Mode replaced around 56% of its source domains week to week, while even for branded queries, the brand's own domain remained present across the full period in only 43% of cases. The same prompt can also produce very different sources across platforms, or when repeated on the same platform at a later point. Google's own AI Overviews and AI Mode returned different sources on 61% of paired captures in one B2B test. That makes any single citation snapshot a poor measure of sustained AI visibility.

Exposure Ninja's own monitoring found the same instability across platforms. We tracked 59 GB-targeted prompts every day across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews from 24 June to 7 August 2026, resulting in 7,965 responses.

Even when the same prompt was tested on the same day, the platforms often cited completely different websites. ChatGPT and Google AI Overviews did not cite a single website in common in 49% of comparisons, while ChatGPT and Perplexity, had no sources in common in 42%. Perplexity and Google AI Overviews were more similar, but still cited entirely different websites in 18% of comparisons.

The sources also changed from one day to the next, even on the same platform. ChatGPT returned the same set of cited websites on only 2% of consecutive-day comparisons, while Google AI Overviews did so on 6%. For Perplexity, the figure was 27%, although it typically cites fewer websites and is more likely to return no citations at all. In most cases, at least one source remained from the previous day, but the overall mix frequently changed.

Because this was a fixed set of marketing-focused prompts, these figures should not be treated as a market-wide benchmark. What they do show is how quickly the mix of cited sources can change, both between platforms and from one day to the next.



Each bar shows how often two AI platforms, asked the same question on the same day, cited completely different sources, with not a single website in common.

ChatGPT and Google AI Overviews were the least alike, citing zero of the same websites nearly half the time.

What People Ask

Search Arena, a peer-reviewed study (ICLR 2026), offers one of the clearest views of intent in search-focused AI use. In its dataset, 37.9% of prompts were factual lookup or information synthesis, and a further 31.7% were analysis, recommendation or guidance.

Because the dataset is search-intensive and self-selected, it should not be treated as representative of all AI users. What it does show is that people are using AI to understand topics, weigh up options and ask for recommendations; all points where brands can influence a decision.

Do Technical Shortcuts Work?

Two technical tactics have attracted attention as potential ways to increase AI citations:

- JSON-LD structured data, which adds machine-readable information to a page.
- llms.txt, a proposed file intended to help AI systems identify and understand a website's content.

So far, however, there is little evidence that either improves citation visibility on its own. A matched test of 1,885 pages found no citation uplift from adding JSON-LD structured data, while 97% of llms.txt files received no traffic at all. Google has also confirmed that such files are not required. That does not make structured data redundant: it still supports established search features, product feeds, entities and rich results. The point is simply not to implement it solely to increase AI citations.

There is no reliable shortcut to an AI citation, and a one-off appearance says little about whether visibility will last. The stronger approach is to publish clear, current, evidence-dense content that a model can quote and attribute with confidence, then map which sources each priority engine cites for the commercial questions that matter to your audience. Because those sources vary by platform and intent, citation visibility should be measured across repeated runs rather than single snapshots.

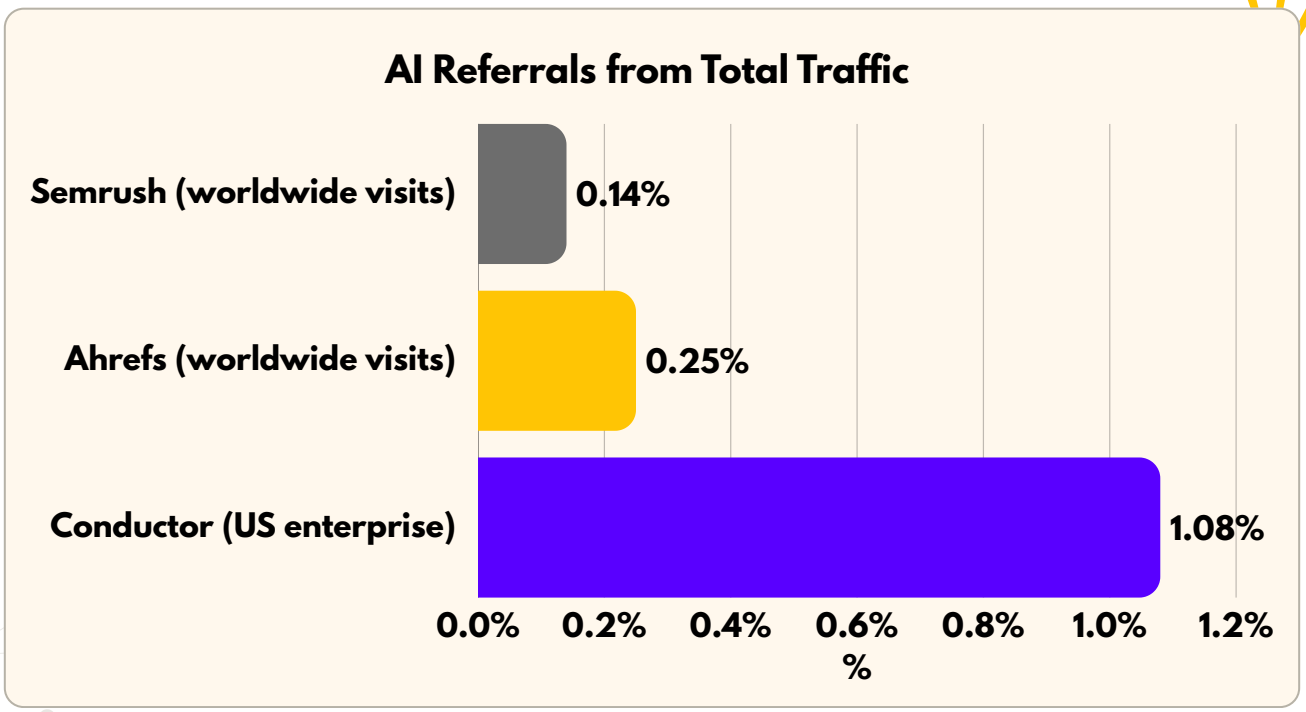
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Traffic, Referrals and the Influence You Cannot See

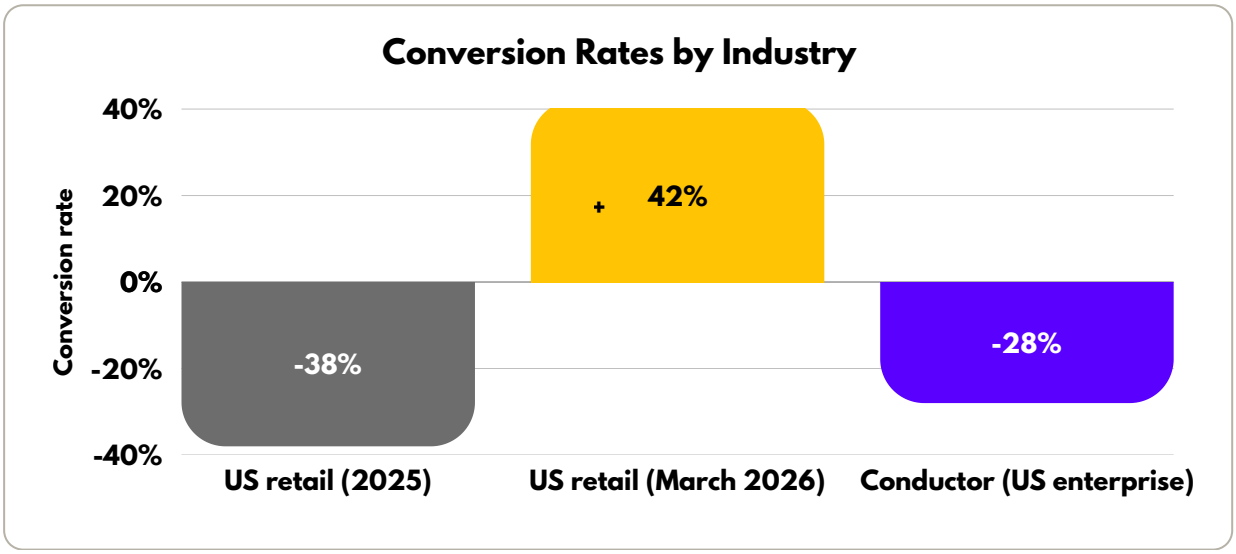
AI Search sends a small share of directly identifiable website traffic. But referral clicks capture only part of their influence.

Identifiable AI Referrals Remain Small But Can Convert Well

Across the analysed datasets, identifiable AI referrals still account for a low-single-digit share of total website traffic. Semrush estimates 0.14% of worldwide visits and Ahrefs 0.25%, while Conductor reports 1.08% for US enterprise domains. These studies use different denominators and do not provide a single benchmark, but they all show growth from a small base. The commercial value of those visits is also improving in some categories. In US retail, AI-referred traffic converted 42% better than non-AI traffic in March 2026, reversing a 38% disadvantage a year earlier, while visits rose 393% year on year (Adobe).



A strong conversion rate does not hold across every category, though. In US travel, for example, AI-referred traffic grew 194% year on year but still converted 28% worse than other channels (Adobe).

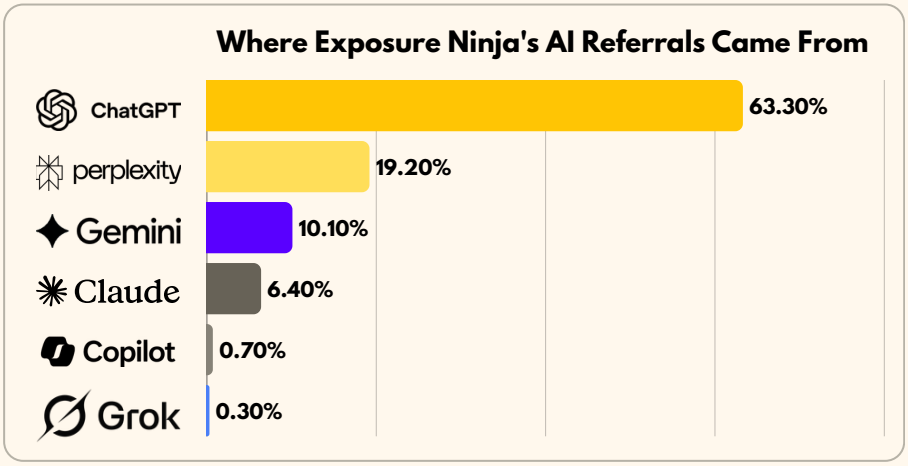


Case Study - Exposure Ninja

We looked at Exposure Ninja's Google Analytics to assess how AI Search impacts conversion rates in the digital marketing sector. We analysed two primary metrics: how much traffic AI platforms send to the site, and whether those visits lead to meaningful commercial actions.

Our analytics draw a similar conclusion: AI referrals are a small share of traffic, but they can lead to commercial actions. Six identifiable AI referrers accounted for 6,566 sessions over two years (1 August 2024-31 July 2026), or 1.9% of all sessions, with ChatGPT alone contributing 63%.

That share is slightly higher than the market estimates above, which is reasonable for a marketing and SEO audience that uses AI tools more heavily than the general population.



Based on key events during that period, AI traffic converted at a rate of 0.64%. Importantly, these only represent visits arriving with a trackable AI referrer.

The Caveat: AI Traffic Is Not Always Directly Attributed as a Referral

AI can influence a customer's decision without appearing as the source of the eventual website visit. A customer can receive an AI recommendation and then reach a brand later through a Google search, a direct visit or another route. Standard referral reports will not attribute those later visits to AI.

Similarweb's US clickstream study found that users who received a ChatGPT recommendation were 2.5 times more likely to visit that brand's site within seven days, with most of those visits arriving later through branded search rather than a trackable AI referral. A separate linked-clickstream study found a similar association: recommendations were associated with a +4.3 percentage-point increase in Google searches for the same brand name and a +2.4-point increase in visits to the brand's site. Neither study proves that the AI recommendation caused every later search or visit. Still, both show how relying on referral traffic alone can understate AI's role in driving later searches and website visits.



Referral traffic shows only the visits that can be directly traced back to an AI platform, and it is best treated as such. Branded search and direct visit trends can help show what happens afterwards, particularly when AI influences research before someone reaches the website. They cannot prove that AI caused those visits, but they can help reveal activity that referral data alone would not capture.

The Commercialisation of AI Search

6

Our 2025 prediction of “pay-to-play” visibility has largely materialised. Advertising is now increasingly baked into the AI answer experience. AI agents that choose and buy products on a customer's behalf, however, are still in the early stages of adoption.

Paid AI Visibility Does Not Mean Paying for a Recommendation

The arrival of advertising in AI Search creates a new way for brands to appear alongside AI-generated answers, but it does not change how organic recommendations are selected. Paid placements sit alongside or around the answer; advertisers cannot currently pay to become one of the sources or brands the AI recommends organically.

So, while paid AI visibility gives marketers another advertising format to test, it does not replace the need to earn organic AI visibility by signalling strong content, authority and relevance.

AI Is Influencing Purchases, Even If It Is Not Making Them

The more important distinction is between AI-assisted shopping and autonomous AI buying. Consumers can already use AI to research products, compare options and narrow down a purchase without handing over the final decision. Giving an AI agent permission to complete that purchase independently is a much bigger behavioural step.

Current adoption reflects that gap. Reports find that willingness to let AI make the final purchase decision is at just 11%, even in low-risk categories, and self-reported use of autonomous agents to place orders is even lower (5%). For now, the commercial opportunity is much broader at the research and consideration stage than at the point of autonomous checkout.

Paid AI advertising is established enough to test as UK availability expands, but it should be treated as a distinct format rather than an extension of conventional paid search. In commerce, the more immediate opportunity lies in influencing research and consideration, rather than preparing for fully autonomous buyers. Brands should ensure their product information is clear and easy for AI systems to understand, while keeping investment in autonomous checkout proportionate to current adoption.

7 Where We're Heading: The 2027 Outlook

The evidence tells us where AI Search stands today. Over the next twelve months, we expect the bigger changes to come not from one dramatic shift away from conventional search, but from AI becoming more embedded in existing search behaviour, easier to measure and more visibly regulated.

The following are our predictions based on the patterns we can see today.

AI Search Adoption in the UK Will Grow Through Conventional Search

UK adoption is likely to grow as AI continues to be embedded in the search experiences people already use, rather than through a widespread shift to standalone chatbots.

Ofcom's 2026 research found that 75% of online UK adults read AI-generated search summaries at least some of the time. Even among people who do not use AI chatbots, 54% encounter them. The behaviour is more pronounced among younger users: 62% of 16–24-year-olds and 60% of 25–34-year-olds say they read AI Search summaries often or always.

We expect UK adoption to broaden partly through passive exposure to AI inside conventional search, even among people who would not describe themselves as AI users. Age and trust are likely to remain important dividing lines, so adoption will not proceed at the same pace across all audiences.

It also means that focusing on chatbot usage alone risks underestimating or overlooking how many UK consumers are already encountering AI during search.

AI Search Measurement Will Become More Granular

We expect marketers to get considerably better data on AI Search over the next year, although attribution will remain imperfect.

Google has already taken an important step with its dedicated Generative AI performance reports in Search Console. The current version reports impressions, pages, countries, devices and dates, for generative AI features, including AI Overviews and AI Mode, and Google says it continues to explore additional metrics based on feedback from site owners.

But as AI Search becomes a larger part of marketing activity, we expect platforms and analytics providers to improve the way AI visibility, referral traffic, and downstream behaviour are separated and reported.

Branded Search Will Become a More Important Signal of AI Influence

We expect branded search to become more useful for understanding AI's wider commercial influence as adoption grows.

The evidence in this report shows that AI recommendations can lead to later branded searches and website visits that are not recorded as AI referrals.

If that behaviour becomes more common, businesses may see AI citations and recommendations rise without a corresponding increase in directly attributed AI traffic.

That makes branded-search demand increasingly important to watch alongside AI referrals, direct visits and conversions rather than judging channels on last-click attribution alone.

This may be particularly important for businesses that have historically relied on non-branded search visibility, where AI recommendations could shift more of the eventual demand towards branded search.

AI Transparency Will Become a Brand Consideration, Not Just a Compliance One

Greater traceability will not only make AI use easier to identify. It will also force businesses to think more carefully about when that use should be disclosed, how it is explained and how audiences may respond.

That matters particularly in the UK, where attitudes remain cautious. Ofcom found that 57% of adults who are aware of AI would trust an AI-written news story less than one written by a person, rising to 68% among adults aged 55 and over.

The UK does not currently require every use of AI in advertising to be labelled. However, the ASA says existing advertising rules still apply regardless of how content is produced, and disclosure may be appropriate where omitting AI involvement could mislead an audience.

We expect this to become as much a brand decision as a regulatory one. Businesses will increasingly need to decide when disclosing AI use builds trust, when it adds little value, and when stronger human oversight is needed because expertise, authenticity or credibility are central to the buying decision.

The question will shift from "Can we use AI here?" to "How should we use it, what level of human oversight does this need, and what does our audience need to know?"

AI-Generated Content Will Be More Closely Scrutinised

We expect provenance (knowing whether and how AI was involved in creating content) to become a more established part of how digital content is created, distributed and verified. As that happens, businesses will increasingly need to think about how they use AI, how much human oversight sits around it and, in some cases, how that involvement is disclosed.

The EU AI Act's Article 50 transparency requirements took effect on 2 August 2026. Among other obligations, providers must make AI-generated or manipulated content detectable through machine-readable marking, as far as technically feasible. Around 190 organisations have also signed the EU's Code of Practice on Transparency of AI-generated Content, including Anthropic, OpenAI and Google.

One of the most established examples is Google's SynthID, which embeds an imperceptible watermark into AI-generated text, images, audio and video. For text, it subtly influences the choices a model makes between different words. Across a sufficiently long passage, those choices create a statistical pattern that a detector can look for without inserting visible labels or hidden characters.

Google's published research on SynthID-Text found that the system could operate at scale without a measurable reduction in output quality. But detection is probabilistic, not infallible. Short passages can be harder to assess, while editing and paraphrasing can weaken the watermark. False positives are also possible, so a positive result should not automatically be treated as definitive proof of AI authorship.

When sharing its Claude text-watermarking system, which is based on SynthID-Text, Anthropic says a detected watermark can indicate that Claude was likely involved, but cannot tell whether Claude wrote the content entirely or substantially edited human-written work.

A complete rewrite can remove the watermark altogether, while using Claude only for proofreading may introduce too few changes for its involvement to register.

Ultimately, a watermark is a provenance signal, not a quality score. A positive detection does not show whether the information is accurate, whether a person researched and edited it carefully, or whether AI was used appropriately.

That distinction may become increasingly important as AI use becomes easier to identify. A 2026 study of 261 participants found that disclosing AI involvement generally reduced perceptions of trustworthiness and competence, though responses varied by AI literacy and the type of writing.

However, the evidence does not support treating AI involvement itself as a sign of poor-quality work. A separate 2026 study of research summaries found that human-written abstracts edited with an LLM were rated more favourably than either fully human-written or fully AI-generated versions.

Detectable AI involvement is likely to attract more scrutiny in the short term, but not necessarily greater rejection as audiences become more familiar with how AI is actually used. The distinction between fully automated content and work where AI supports a human-led process should become more important.

For businesses, the question should increasingly become how AI was used, rather than simply whether it was used. At Exposure Ninja, we've always advocated for intentional AI use, believing it can support research, analysis, ideation, editing and production, while our expert team retains responsibility for judgement, accuracy and the finished work.

Provenance standards are already becoming more widespread (as will attempts to bypass them). Neither development will produce a universal "AI detector." Instead, these systems should give businesses, platforms and regulators more information about how content was produced. The challenge will be using that information appropriately: identifying genuine misuse without treating any evidence of AI involvement as a reason to dismiss the content itself.

In line with this, we see content production becoming more human-led and accountable without necessarily becoming less AI-assisted. As AI makes it easier to produce content at scale, simply producing more of it offers less of an advantage. Original insight, expertise, fact-checking, first-hand experience and editorial judgement become more valuable as AI takes on a greater role in the production process.

Final Thoughts

Businesses that rely on search to drive visibility and growth can no longer afford to ignore how they appear in AI-generated answers. AI is already part of how people discover, research, compare and evaluate brands, both through standalone AI platforms and within conventional search.

The clearest takeaway from the 2026 edition of The State of AI Search is that authority matters more, not less. Traditional rankings still influence AI visibility, but they do not determine citation on their own.

AI Search Optimisation goes much further than trying to rank organically for a particular keyword, claim individual citations or reverse-engineer a new set of ranking factors. Businesses need to give search engines and AI platforms clear reasons to understand and recommend them. Expert content and thought leadership, strong technical foundations, consistent brand signals and recognition beyond their own website all contribute to that visibility.

The impact also extends beyond the initial search. An AI recommendation can introduce a business, but how users perceive it and what they find afterwards will influence whether they remember the brand, return later and ultimately convert.

AI Search cannot be treated as separate from SEO, content, Digital PR and brand strategy. Each has a role in building the authority and visibility a business needs to be found and recommended.

The businesses succeeding in AI Search are not chasing every new feature or trying to optimise for each platform individually. Instead, they're strengthening the content, reputation and brand signals that influence whether they are found, trusted and recommended in the first place.

exposure ninja

At Exposure Ninja, we've been pioneers in AI Search. We are one of the first digital marketing agencies to offer an **AI Search Optimisation** service that helps brands win visibility across all generative AI platforms.

We know how to build the strategy, content, and authority needed to get your business recommended, ranked, and remembered in the new world of AI Search.

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