

Staying Visible In 2026

SEO in an AI Search Landscape

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Contents

01 Introduction

04 Data Wins

02 Search is AI-Driven

05 The Discovery
Economy is Rewiring

03 Traffic is Declining

06 A Final Word

This whitepaper is based on our webinar with Head of SEO at Summit, Adam Preston, Strategy and Performance Director of Summit, Carl Hutchinson, and Enterprise Director of Yext, Bryony Rose.

If you would like to be invited to our future events and stay ahead in the retail market, reach out to us at

hello@summitmedia.com

Introduction from Adam Preston

Head of SEO

Over the past year, AI has completely changed how people discover and buy products. For us in retail, SEO is no longer just about keywords – it's about making sure our brand is understood clearly across every AI-powered surface, from search and voice to recommendation engines.



Brands need to start thinking now about things like product data quality, structured content, and how they show up when AI systems are answering questions or making recommendations on a customer's behalf. Waiting until these changes are fully mainstream is often too late.

Our recent webinar 'Staying Visible in 2026 – Retail SEO in an AI Search Landscape' walked through what AI search means for retail SEO, what developments like the Universal Commerce Protocol mean in practice, and how brands can prepare now rather than react later.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to get in touch at hello@summitmedia.com

Adam Preston

Head of SEO,
Summit

1. Search is AI-Driven

From Search Engines to Answer Engines

Search has shifted from a link based discovery model into an AI-driven system designed to complete tasks. The user expectation is moving from “show me the best website,” to “give me the best answer” or “help me buy the right product.” This marks a fundamental change in how visibility is earned.

The 2023–2026 Disruption Cycle

The last four years represent a rapid acceleration of AI integration into consumer search behavior. Each year introduced a distinct disruption, reshaping how traffic is distributed and how decisions are made.

- 2023: Chat-based AI becomes mainstream
- 2024: AI Overviews creates volatility and instability
- 2025: Google reduces outbound clicks through direct answers
- 2026: AI agents increasingly influence or complete purchases

2023



Chat-based AI becomes mainstream

2024



AI Overviews creates volatility and instability

2025



Google reduces outbound clicks through direct answers

2026



AI agents increasingly influence or complete purchase

Search Is Now a Multi-Platform Ecosystem

Search no longer refers exclusively to Google. Different platforms now serve different purposes within the buying journey, forcing brands to rethink channel dependency.

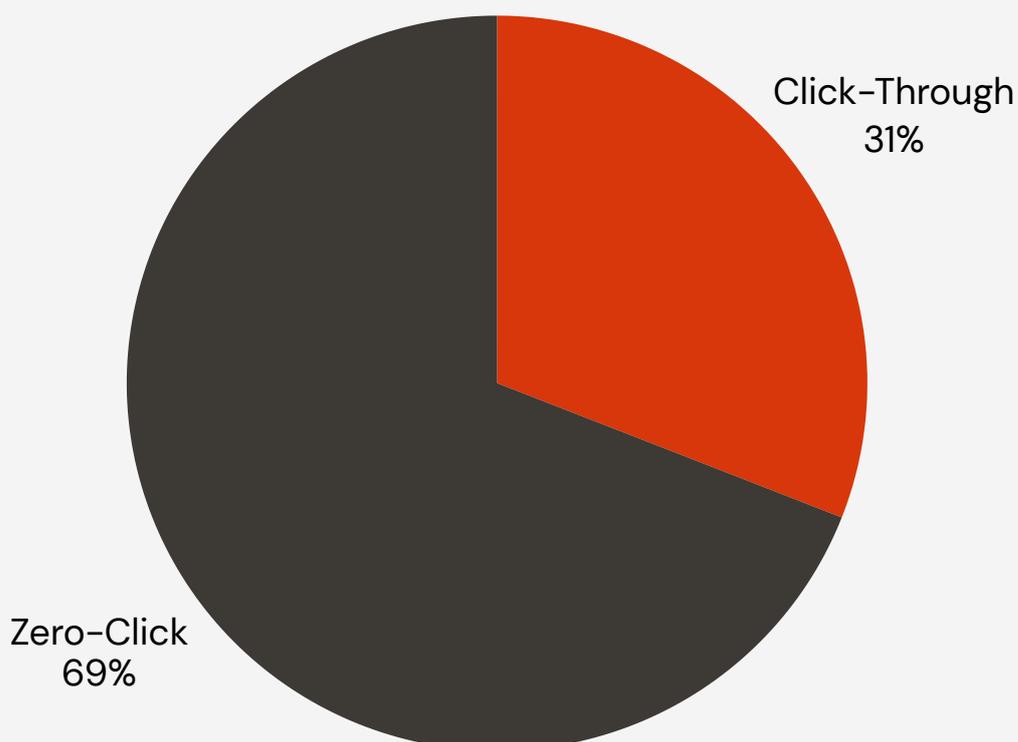
TikTok is increasingly the platform for product discovery, while tools like Perplexity and ChatGPT support comparison and research. Google remains central for verification, price checking, and transactional action.

2. Traffic is Declining

The Zero Click Reality

A majority of searches now result in no website visit at all. In 2025, zero click searches reached **69%**, meaning the search platform itself is now where most informational decision making occurs.

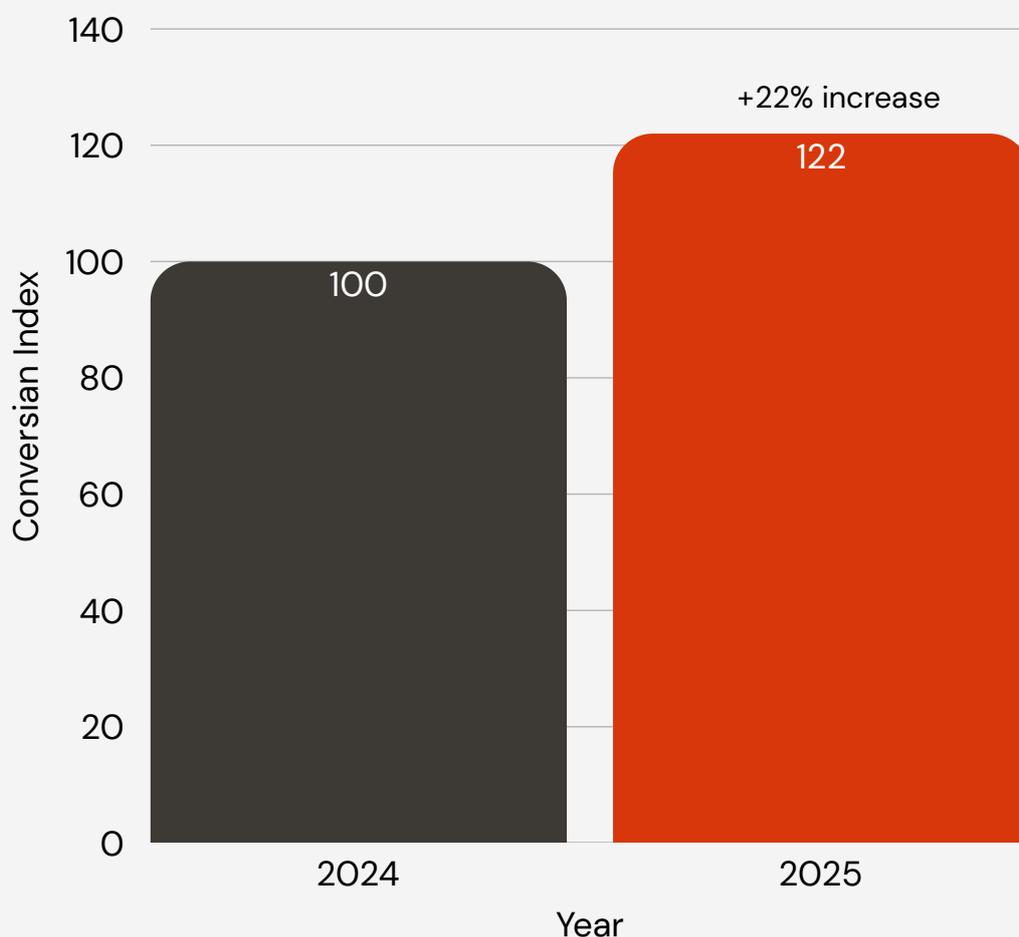
This has permanently reduced the volume of traditional organic traffic and weakened the historical value of ranking for informational queries.



Retail Traffic Is Smaller but Higher Intent

Despite reduced traffic volumes, retail performance may improve due to the quality of remaining visitors. In 2025, retail conversion rates on remaining traffic rose by 22%, indicating that Google increasingly filters out low intent browsing behaviour before users reach the site.

- Lower volume does not necessarily mean lower revenue
- The remaining traffic is more likely to convert
- SEO success must be measured beyond sessions and clicks



The “Great Decoupling” of Visibility and Traffic

Search visibility and website traffic are no longer directly correlated. Brands can appear prominently in AI-driven results while receiving fewer clicks, because users are increasingly consuming content directly on the SERP.

3. Data Wins

AI Systems Depend on Structured Inputs

In 2026, AI does not “read” websites in the way humans do. It relies on structured and machine readable data sources to evaluate products, pricing, and relevance. Brands that cannot be interpreted cleanly by AI systems are significantly less likely to be recommended.

The Product Feed Is the New Homepage

Merchant Center feeds have become the primary interface between retailers and search platforms. When users ask AI tools for products under specific criteria, the system references feed data rather than browsing the website.

This makes Merchant Center optimisation a strategic priority rather than a technical maintenance task.

Feed Optimisation Creates Measurable Visibility Gains

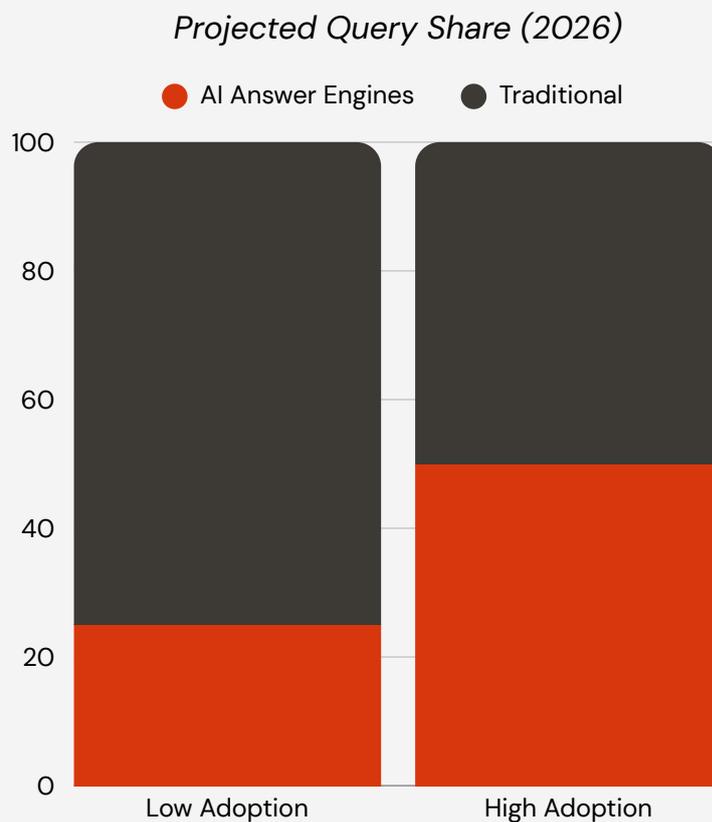
The content highlights clear evidence that feed quality directly impacts visibility. Enriching product attributes such as material, age group, or pattern can increase AI visibility by approximately 30%. Inventory accuracy is equally critical, as AI-generated recommendations create friction if they lead to out-of-stock products.

- Attribute enrichment improves discoverability
- Visual alignment improves relevance in visual search
- Real time inventory reduces recommendation friction

4. The Discovery Economy is Rewiring

AI Answer Engines are Taking Market Share

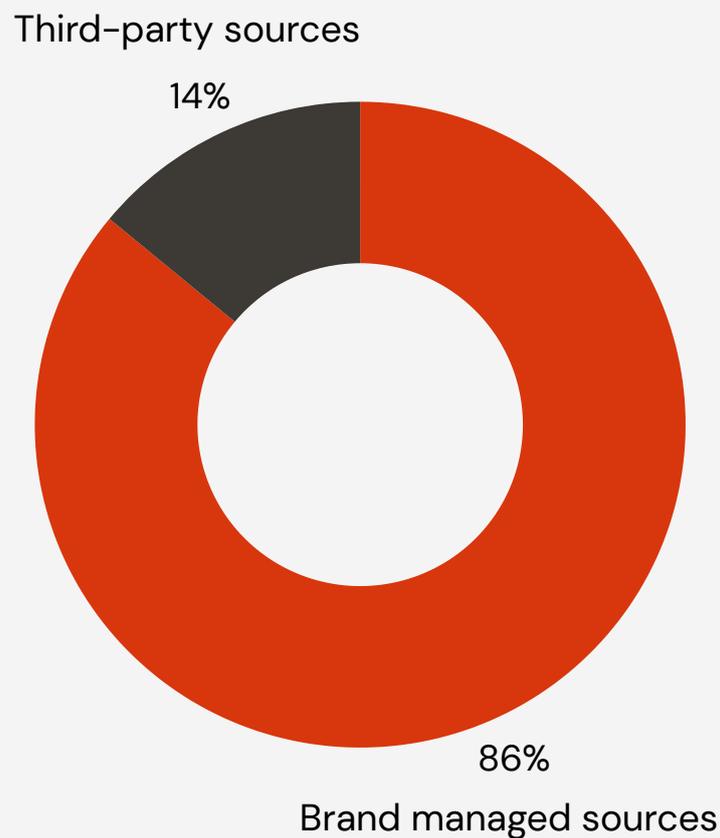
By 2026, it is projected that **25–50%** of consumer queries will shift away from traditional search engines and into AI Answer Engines. This reflects a major change in user behaviour: instead of reviewing multiple sources and making decisions manually, users increasingly expect AI interfaces to provide a single consolidated answer. This shift is significant because it reduces the role of the traditional results page as the primary decision-making environment, and increases the importance of being surfaced directly inside AI-generated responses.



Most AI Citations Come from Brand-Controlled Sources

As AI platforms generate answers, they rely heavily on structured and authoritative sources. Current estimates indicate that 86% of AI citations come from brand-managed sources, such as official websites, product pages, documentation hubs, help centres, and other owned publishing environments.

This is a critical insight for organisations building visibility strategies, because it suggests that AI discovery is strongly influenced by the quality and clarity of information that brands directly control. It also reinforces the growing importance of maintaining accurate and structured content ecosystems, as weak or inconsistent owned information reduces the likelihood of being referenced or recommended.



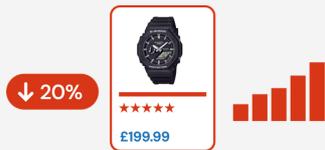
Query Growth Will Continue Even as Organic Traffic Declines

While traditional organic traffic is expected to continue declining due to AI summaries and zero-click experiences, this does not indicate a reduction in overall demand. Instead, total query volume is expected to expand significantly as AI lowers friction and makes information retrieval easier. As the effort required to ask questions decreases, consumers search more frequently, across more platforms, and with more specific intent. The result is a widening gap between total demand and measurable website traffic. Brands must therefore prepare for a world where overall visibility and influence grow in importance, even if direct clicks become a smaller share of total user behaviour.

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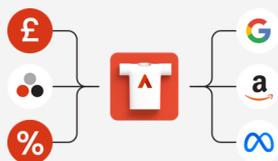
ProductMaximiser



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A final word...

AI is reshaping retail SEO, and Summit helps brands win by optimising feeds, structured data, and entity authority to drive visibility and sales across AI-powered search.



If you would like to find out how Summit can support your business with SEO, covering feed optimisation, structured data, and improving visibility across AI-driven search, please reach out at: hello@summitmedia.com

Or if you would like to find out more about Productcaster, which can save you up to 20% on your CPCs*, provide feed management solutions and ProductMaximiser, also drop us an email: info@productcaster.com

We are also always open to suggestions for future content. If there is a specific SEO or retail discovery topic you would like us to cover, please email us and let us know.

Thanks for reading!

The Summit Team