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White Paper

Being an Expert Isn't Enough If AI Can't Find You

What's Your Authority Gap?

By Connie Mulqueen



Imagine a small SaaS company in the near future with a superior product that is starting to take off in the market.

Customers are enthusiastic. Referrals are bringing in new business. Yet despite having a strong SEO strategy, website traffic is slowing down, and the bounce rate seems to be increasing month to month.

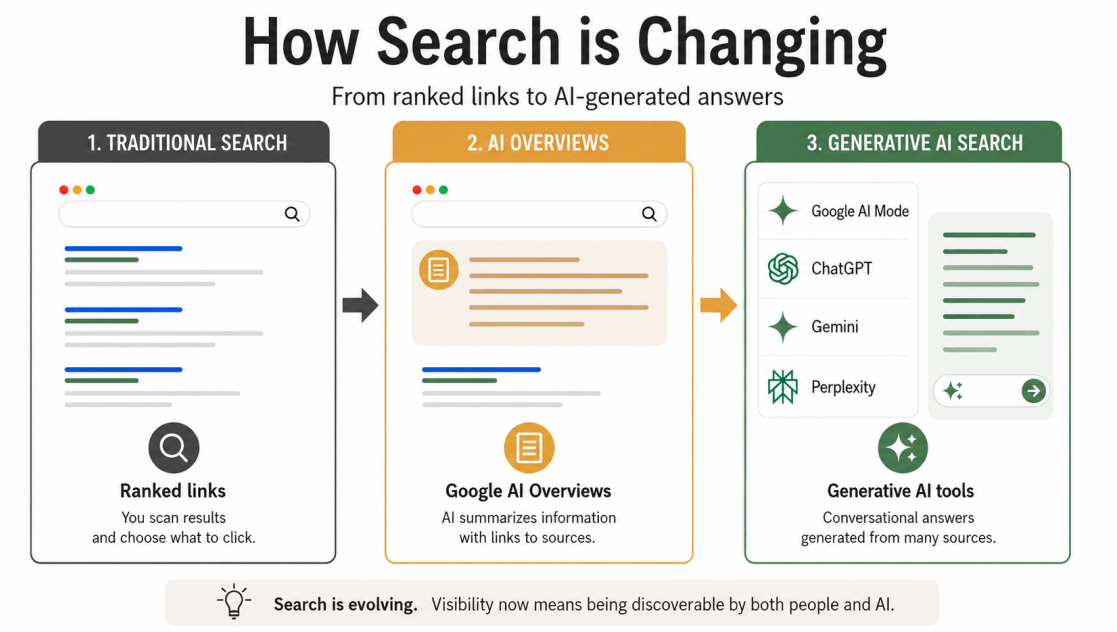
A closer look reveals that competitors with less-developed – or even inferior – products are driving more traffic. An examination of their websites reveals that they are rich in educational and thought leadership content, including customer stories, industry insights and useful information.

Until this discovery, the SaaS company hasn't been particularly concerned that its own website lacks content. With all the referral business coming in, they believed that investing limited resources in a blog or content strategy was a nice-to-have and therefore not a priority.

But as they dig deeper into the problem of their decreasing website traffic, another difference emerges. Their competitors are also showing up regularly in AI-generated answers and recommendations related to their market.

What they learn from this experience and what many real companies are already discovering is that AI is reshaping what it means to compete in the marketplace.

Over time, competition won't just be about who has the best product and the best visibility based on traditional search. It will also be about whose expertise is easier for AI to find, understand and cite.



Rapid Growth in AI Search

Today, traditional ranked-link search still dominates, even as Google expands generative AI search through AI Mode and AI Overviews. AI Overviews appear over the top 10 pages for certain types of searches and AI Mode is now an option at the end of the search bar. At the same time, more people are using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Claude to search for information.

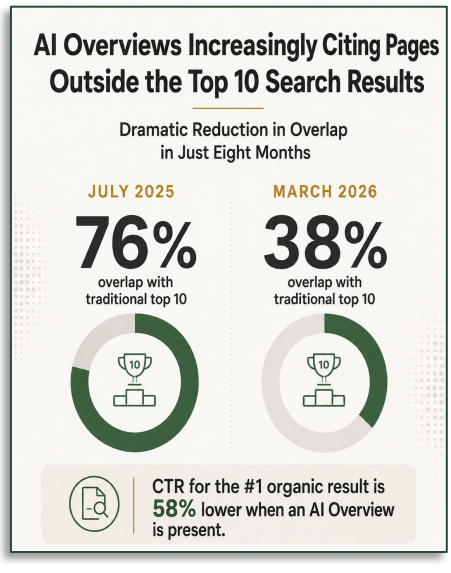
A 2026 Pew survey found that 42% of U.S. adults now use AI chatbots to search for information,[1] while Semrush found that referral traffic from AI tools to websites grew 66% in 2025.[2]

Instead of engaging in multiple searches and clicking through numerous websites to find the right options, buyers can now let AI do most of that legwork for them. In their prompts, they can describe what they want in far greater detail and share their pain points, priorities and preferences.

AI can then synthesize information from multiple sources and quickly surface a shortlist of options that closely match the buyer's stated needs — along with explanations of why particular products or services may be relevant.

For small to mid-size businesses, that makes visibility to AI especially valuable.

The Authority Gap: A Measure of AI Visibility



As more buyers discover the value of AI search, companies may want to start paying attention to what marketers are calling the authority gap — the distance between the authority a company actually has and the authority AI systems are able to recognize.

AI visibility can look very different from traditional search visibility, which doesn't necessarily tell the whole story.

For example, an update of an Ahrefs analysis of 863,000 Google searches found in March 2026 that only about 38% of the sources cited in Google AI Overviews also ranked among the traditional top 10 results for the same query.[3] That low percentage overlap between the AI and traditional search results on Google is a radical drop from a much higher 76% overlap reported in the July 2025 analysis.[4]

During that roughly eight-month period, Google implemented an aggressive shift in its AI Overview criteria from keyword matching to favoring content depth and alternative formats across the web, such as YouTube, Reddit, and niche comprehensive resources to answer a user's broader intent.[5]

In another analysis, Ahrefs discovered that the presence of an AI overview has a dramatic impact on the click-through rate of the top 10 results, with the CTR loss expanding from 34.5% in April 2025 to 58% by December 2025.[6]

What this demonstrates is that Google's AI is finding useful sources beyond the websites already dominating first-page results and that searchers are increasingly clicking on those findings over the top 10. Even more interestingly, some of those AI sources may have relatively low visibility in traditional search.

AI Search Opportunity for Smaller Businesses

For smaller businesses competing against organizations with much larger marketing budgets, this could be encouraging news.

Smaller businesses may not have the SEO strength to outrank a giant competitor for every important search term, but if they can create genuinely useful, relevant content, they may still have an opportunity to surface in AI search results.

That makes the authority gap an opportunity for specialized companies with real expertise — if they make that expertise visible.

Closing the authority gap means finding a systematic way to extract that expertise, contextualize it into meaningful stories and insights, and develop it into a body of substantive content that both buyers and AI systems can recognize as valuable.

While this has always been true, as Google has been using AI in its traditional search for years to determine such things as originality and evidence, AI search systems like Google's AI Mode add another layer of criteria that enables AI to surface relevant sources that are harder to find in traditional search.

From Expertise to Visible Authority

If a company's expertise never makes it onto its website and into articles, case studies, videos, interviews, research, customer stories or other accessible content, an AI system has far fewer opportunities to encounter and recognize it.

Specialized businesses often have extraordinary knowledge inside the company, but it may be distributed among people with very different roles across the organization.

To start, that knowledge lives and thrives in founders and senior leaders with years of industry experience. It constantly percolates within the product team as they continue to develop and enhance the product based on customer feedback and market demand.

It rolls off the tongue of salespeople who have answered the same difficult customer questions hundreds of times. And it continually deepens within customer success teams that know customers' struggles firsthand — what makes them happy, what keeps them loyal and what drives them out the door.



The challenge is that many of those people don't necessarily think of their knowledge as content or see themselves as experts.

To them, it's just their job.

So part of converting expertise into AI-discoverable content is coaxing subject-matter experts out of their comfort zones and helping them recognize the value of what they know.

Another challenge for businesses with fewer resources will be developing an efficient process for identifying who has the knowledge, figuring out how to tap those experts for content, creating a manageable editorial calendar, and deciding how each story or message can be used across multiple formats and channels.

All of this can be done over time at whatever pace the business can handle. The point is that the organization's content gradually evolves into a substantial body of rich, robust and helpful content that AI can recognize as authoritative.

What Does AI Consider Authoritative?

There is no magic checklist.

OpenAI says ChatGPT Search ranks results using multiple factors intended to help users find relevant, reliable information. It does not publish a formula telling businesses exactly what will earn a citation.[7]

Google is somewhat more explicit about the qualities it wants its search systems to recognize. Its guidance around E-E-A-T – Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness – emphasizes content that demonstrates firsthand expertise, clear sourcing and evidence, original information or analysis, and substantial value beyond what is already available elsewhere.[8]

What this means for businesses that want to compete in AI search is fairly simple – authoritative content needs substance.

For a small business, that substance might include:

- Original research or company data
- Case studies showing how a solution solved a problem
- Answers to nuanced questions customers ask during real sales conversations
- Detailed explanations that help customers make better decisions
- Perspectives on changes occurring in the industry
- Credible evidence supporting the claims the company makes

In addition to presenting expertise through substantive content, small businesses will need to make sure they are accessible to AI.

For example, OpenAI says sites that want their content eligible to appear in ChatGPT Search should allow its OAI-SearchBot to crawl them.[9]

No Need to Become a Content Factory

A company with a limited marketing staff – or no dedicated content team at all – is unlikely to win a "content volume" contest against a major competitor.

The good news is that smaller businesses don't necessarily have to compete on content volume to show up in AI search.

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Smaller companies don’t need to match larger competitors article for article. What matters more is making better use of the expertise they already have to create authoritative content.

That means identifying the areas where the business has meaningful knowledge, uncovering what its people know, connecting that knowledge to questions customers are actually asking, and building useful content around those subjects and topics over time.

Instead of constantly creating something from scratch, companies can find multiple ways to re-purpose each strong story or idea.

For instance, that could mean:

- Interviewing a founder and turning one conversation into a blog series and a speaking engagement
- Videotaping a conversation with a sales rep about the questions prospects repeatedly ask, then turning it into a video series for social channels, a blog and an ebook
- Developing a customer story from a particularly interesting problem and then using quotes and parts of the story in sales presentations, sales collateral and website pages
- Talking with the product team about an approach competitors routinely misunderstand, then developing a blog, ebook and short video around it
- Taking an issue everyone in the industry is discussing, offering a perspective grounded in years of firsthand experience through a podcast and converting that material into an article or campaign asset

None of that requires publishing something every day.

But it does require being intentional about turning institutional knowledge into visible expertise.

Still Time to Close the Gap

Informa TechTarget argues that the authority gap can appear in AI responses before it becomes visible in pipeline results.[10]

That is one reason a company like our hypothetical SaaS business could be doing perfectly well on referrals today and then find itself losing potential business down the road.

We are still early in understanding exactly how AI search will change the way buyers find and evaluate companies. Anyone claiming to have cracked a definitive formula for AI authority is probably getting ahead of the evidence.

But one thing already seems clear:

Being an authority in your market and being recognized as one online are no longer the same thing.

And this could be good news for smaller companies with years of expertise, strong products and loyal customers.

They may already possess exactly what AI-generated search needs most – real knowledge based on real experience.

They just need to get it out of their heads and into the world as AI plays a growing role in how buyers research and evaluate their options.



Sources

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