



SEO & GEO Trend Report 2026

*From ranking to answerability
in the answer economy*



Executive summary

Search is not disappearing. Search is fragmenting.

Google remains by far the **dominant search layer**, with an **89.85% global market share** in search in March 2026. At the same time, **ChatGPT leads the global AI chatbot market with 78.16%**, while Gemini sits at 8.65%. For brands, this does not signal a simple shift from “Google to AI”, but a **hybrid landscape** in which classic rankings, AI-generated answers and new commerce interfaces exist side by side. Google also explicitly positions **AI Overviews and AI Mode as part of Search**, not as separate ecosystems.



Year	Zero-Click Rate	Organic Click Rate	Key Driver
2019	~50.0%	~41.5%	Knowledge panels, featured snippets
2020	~53.2%	~39.0%	People Also Ask expansion
2022	~57.0%	~35.8%	SERP feature densification
2024	~60.0%	~32.4%	AI Overviews initial rollout
2025	~62.1%	~29.6%	AI Overviews expansion
2026	64.82%	27.6%	AI Overviews + AI search engines

The right response is therefore not to write off SEO, but to bring SEO and GEO together into one integrated visibility strategy.

This shift does, however, **change the economics of visibility**. In an analysis of 300,000 keywords, Ahrefs found that the presence of an AI Overview was associated with a **58% lower average CTR** for the result in position one. SparkToro previously reported that in 2024, **59.7% of EU Google searches and 58.5% of US searches ended without a click**. The precise impact differs by query type, but the direction is clear: traffic remains important, but **the click is losing its monopoly** as the primary success metric.

The new game is therefore **less about ranking alone, and more about selection**. Google says that AI Overviews and AI Mode can use “**query fan-out**” to combine multiple related searches and data sources into a single answer. In parallel, a recent Ahrefs study shows that **only 38% of pages cited in AI Overviews also rank in the top 10** of the same SERP. This explains why **classic SEO is still necessary, but no longer sufficient**: brands do not only need to be findable, they need to be **citable, summarizable and contextually credible**.

The implication for marketers and brands is **strategic, not cosmetic**. Google explicitly states that the **same SEO fundamentals remain relevant for AI features**, that there are **no additional technical requirements** to appear as a supporting link, and that no special AI markup or additional machine-readable files are required. At the same time, Princeton research and market studies show that **answer-ready content**, with source references, statistics, expertise signals and clear structure, **performs measurably better in generative environments**.

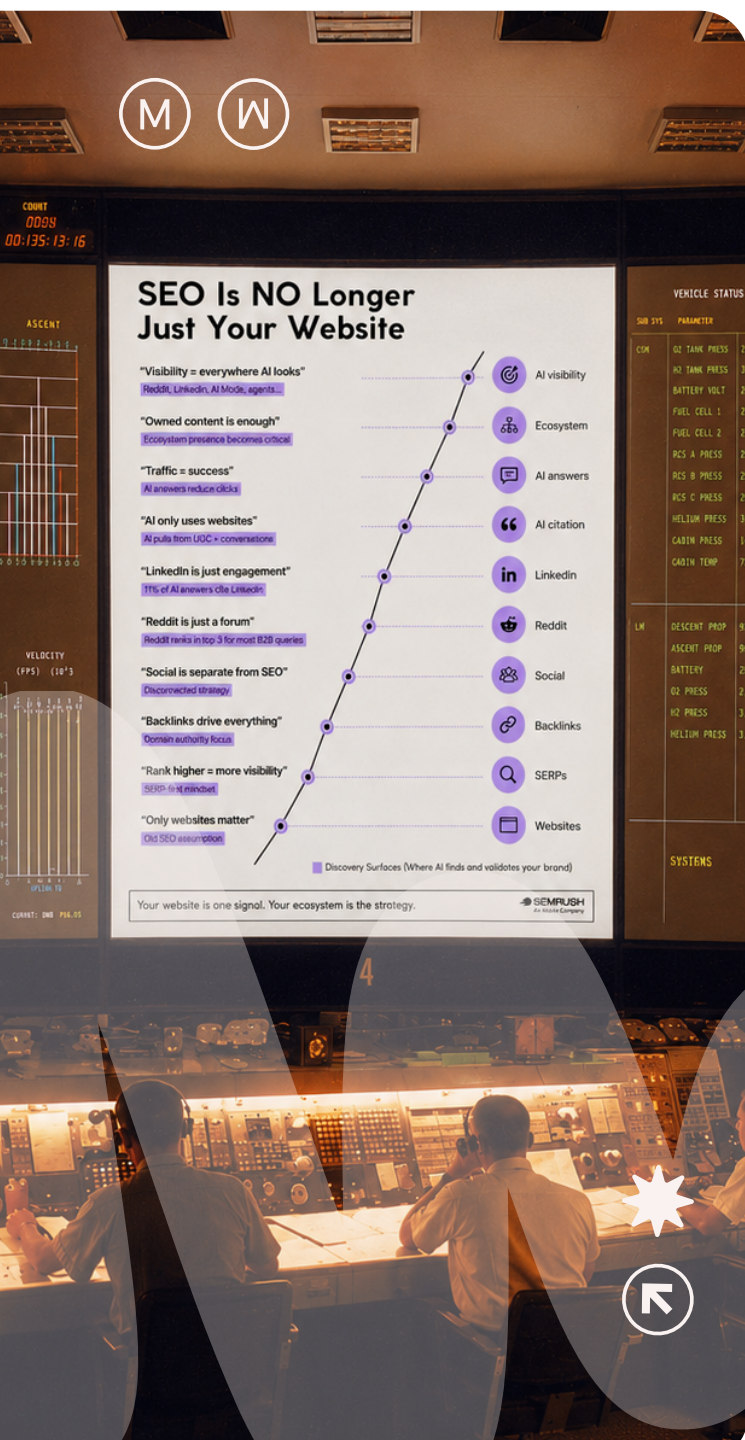
Methodology and scope

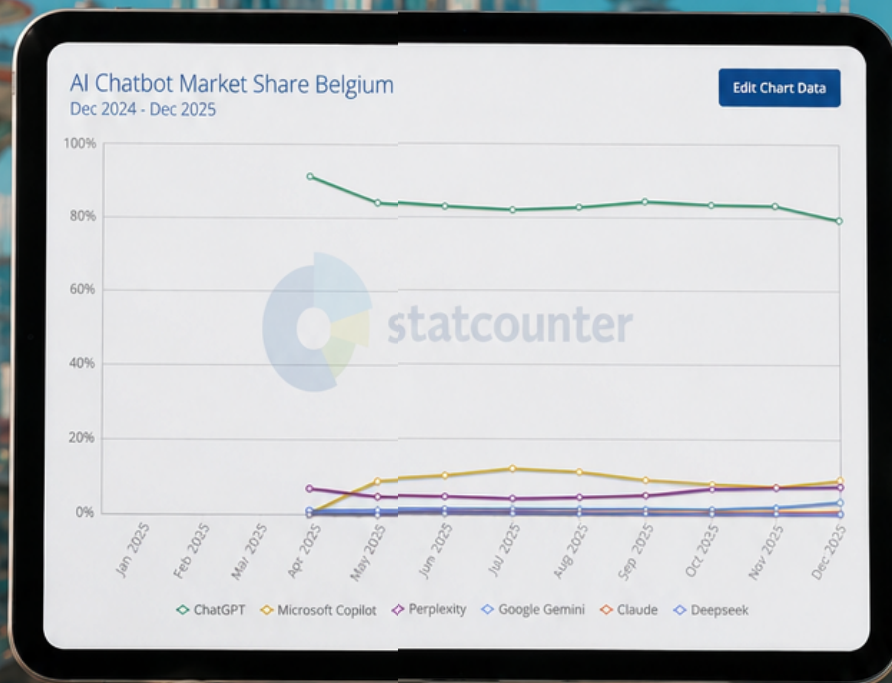
This report combines four types of input: **official platform documentation** from Google and OpenAI, market data from Statcounter, clickstream and CTR research from third parties, and the strategic pillars from our internal research. Because **AI search is evolving rapidly**, individual figures should be read as **directional signals rather than universal benchmarks** for every sector or query set. The structural conclusion, however, is stable: **visibility is shifting from ranking alone to a mix of ranking, citation eligibility and transaction readiness**.

Introduction

For years, search was a **relatively simple game**. A user entered a query, Google showed a list of results, and **brands competed for the click**. That model has not disappeared, but it has been **fundamentally expanded**. Between the classic results layer and the final transaction, **a new answer layer has emerged**: AI systems that summarize, reorder, compare and increasingly operationalize information. Google does this inside Search through AI Overviews and AI Mode; ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and other interfaces do the same within their own environments.

For marketers, **this changes the central question**. It is no longer only: **"How do I get my page to position one?"** The more important question becomes: **"Why would a model choose my brand or content as a source for the answer?"** That is the essence of GEO: **not an alternative to SEO, but an extension of it into answer engines and agentic interfaces**.





Google confirms this **hybrid logic** itself. In its Search Central documentation, the company states that **AI Overviews and AI Mode are part of Google Search**, and that **SEO best practices remain relevant** for these AI features. AI Overviews are also shown only when Google expects them to add value to classic Search; they do not trigger for every query. This nuance matters: **the SERP is not disappearing**, but it is being **expanded with answer layers** that become especially important for complex, informational and comparative searches. For brands, the practical consequence is clear.

Visibility now needs to be organized across **three levels: in the index, in the answer and ultimately in the transaction**. Brands that still think only in rankings miss half of the new landscape. Brands that write off classic SEO misunderstand the landscape just as much.

The winner of 2026 is not the brand that chooses between SEO or GEO, but the brand that organizes both disciplines under one search strategy.



2. The click is losing its monopoly

The fact that classic search continues to exist does not mean that the **economic logic of search remains unchanged**. The rise of AI-generated answers is visibly **putting pressure on click-through behavior**. In early 2026, Ahrefs found that an AI Overview was associated with **58% less CTR for the top result**. The same study also found a negative effect for positions two through ten, although less pronounced. These studies are not a perfect reflection of every niche, but they do confirm what many publishers and SEO teams have been observing for some time:

A growing share of information needs is being resolved before the click.

That trend aligns with broader **zero-click data**. Based on clickstream analysis, SparkToro reported that in 2024, **59.7% of EU searches and 58.5% of US searches ended without a click**. That figure emerged even before the broad rollout of the most advanced AI search experiences. The trend is therefore older than AI Overviews alone, but **generative answer layers are clearly accelerating it**.

For marketers, this means that **traffic reporting alone tells an incomplete story**. A brand can become **more visible in the answer layer while receiving fewer clicks** on informational content. That is not a paradox;

it is the result of an interface shift.

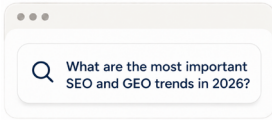
To understand the impact of GEO, teams therefore need to look beyond traffic and include citation share, brand mentions in AI answers, branded search lift, assisted conversions and the quality of sessions that do click through.

3. How answer engines choose sources

1 Prompt

One prompt

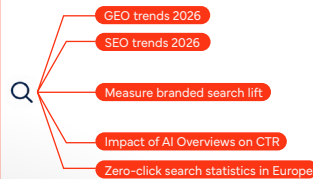
The user asks one question.



2 Query fan-out

The system splits one question into multiple related searches.

This immediately makes it clear that one prompt does not equal one search term.



3 Sources & subtopics

Multiple sources and perspectives

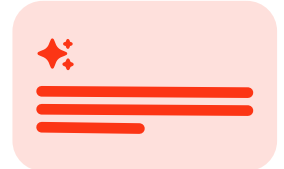
The model searches across subtopics, contexts and data sources.



4 AI answer

One synthesized answer

The information found is combined into a single answer, often with citations.



Google also says that AI features can show a **broader and more diverse set of links** than classic web search. That explains why **traditional top-10 positions** still correlate with visibility, but are **no longer decisive**. In March 2026, Ahrefs found that **only 38% of AI Overview citations** came from pages that also ranked in the top 10 of the same SERP; the rest ranked in positions 11–100 or even beyond. In other words, answer engines are not only looking for the best-ranking source, but for the **source that best supports the answer**.

At the same time, the **baseline requirement remains surprisingly classic**. According to Google, a page must be **indexed and eligible for a regular snippet** to appear as a supporting link in AI Overviews or AI Mode. There are **no additional technical requirements** on top of existing Search requirements. That matters, because it removes much of the hype: **AI visibility still starts with crawlability, indexability and content quality**.



GEO is therefore not a standalone technical discipline; it is an additional layer on top of a solid SEO foundation.



4. What wins visibility in generative environments

If ranking is no longer the only selection signal, which content characteristics become more important? The Princeton GEO paper provides a useful answer. In GEO-bench, the research showed that certain optimizations could **increase visibility in generative engine responses by up to 40%**. **Source references, statistics, expert quotes, technical terminology and high fluency** were particularly important. That does not mean every article suddenly needs to sound academic. It does mean that generative systems respond better to content that is **clearly attributable, fact-dense and semantically precise**.

For content teams, this translates into a **different writing discipline**. Good GEO content is not an inflated blog post that spends seven paragraphs warming up before finally giving an answer. Good GEO content **defines a question clearly, provides a compact answer quickly, supports that answer with evidence**, and only then expands. Think in **answer modules**: definitions, comparison tables, step-by-step guides, short summaries, source blocks and clear subheadings. A page should not only be readable for humans; it should also be **easy for machines to extract**.

This shift also creates a new risk around **"thin content"**. Not because Google has suddenly become stricter than before, but because **answer engines have little patience for vagueness**. A brand that publishes only generic claims, **"high-quality service", "premium quality", "innovation"**, provides little material that a model can safely reuse. A brand that works with **concrete attributes, category clarity, expert attribution and up-to-date facts** increases its chances of being selected as a supporting source.

5. Off-site presence becomes a source of credibility

A second major shift is that AI visibility is increasingly no longer decided solely on your own domain. In 2026, Ahrefs reported that YouTube was the most cited domain in AI Overviews, with 34% growth over six months. That is not a detail, but a signal: the answer layer does not rely only on corporate websites, but also on video platforms, communities, encyclopedic sources and other external signal layers.

For brands, this means off-site presence is no longer merely a distribution layer, but an input layer before selection. A strong brand profile in AI emerges when multiple sources confirm the same story: your site defines who you are, an expert or founder clarifies that on LinkedIn or in earned media, customers or communities provide context, and YouTube or other formats make expertise tangible. AI systems do not need to “believe” this in exactly the same way humans do, but they do respond to consistent entity signals across multiple surfaces.

That is why building a knowledge center without a distribution strategy is no longer enough. The future winner is the brand that not only publishes its expertise, but externalizes it. Not every brand needs to be equally active on every platform, but every brand does need a credible citation footprint beyond its own domain.



6. SEO and GEO are converging

SEO

Focus and output

- Focuses on ranking, keyword mapping and click acquisition
- Makes a page relevant for a specific search query
- Primarily optimizes for organic traffic and clicks
- Builds authority through backlinks and domain strength
- Often works from separate keyword pages

Fundamentals and approach

- Crawlability and indexability
- Internal links and structured data
- Technical performance
- Content hygiene
- Link building
- Content on the owned domain

GEO

focus and output

- Focuses on entity clarity, answer formatting and source credibility
- Makes a page usable as a building block for an AI-generated answer
- Optimizes for citations, brand mentions and visibility in the answer layer
- Builds credibility through expertise and presence beyond the owned domain
- Works from thematic answer clusters and extractable content modules

Fundamentals and approach

- Builds on the same SEO fundamentals
- Requires no special schema.org markup or AI text files
- Structures content so information is easy to extract
- Shifts from keyword pages to thematic answer clusters
- Expands link building into brand presence in trusted environments
- Connects content on the owned domain with external expertise and sources

7. Measuring in the answer economy

That is why SEO/GEO in 2026 requires a broader measurement framework.
A mature dashboard combines at least four layers.

- Layer 1: **Classic organic performance:** rankings, impressions, clicks, CTR and conversion contribution.
- Layer 2: **AI visibility:** how often your brand, domain or experts appear in AI-generated answers across priority query clusters.
- Layer 3: **Citation quality:** which sources are cited alongside you, and on which topics you are or are not selected.
- Layer 4: **Business impact:** branded search, direct traffic, conversion rate, sales assist and lead quality.

The most important thing is that teams do not fall into the trap of assuming the wrong causality.
Fewer informational clicks do not automatically mean less brand impact.
More citations do not automatically mean more revenue. The key question is always: where in the journey is value shifting? In 2026, part of that value is shifting from the click to the influence layer above it.





8. llms.txt, structured data and the difference between hype and groundwork

New tactics can be interesting, but they do not replace a solid SEO foundation.

Around GEO, a **new layer of tactical hype is emerging**. llms.txt is a good example. The official llms.txt site describes it as a proposal: an /llms.txt file that can provide LLM-friendly context and links. As an experiment, that is interesting, especially for documentation-heavy or technically complex sites. But it is **not a broadly accepted baseline standard**, and certainly **not a replacement for classic SEO work**.

Google is notably clear on this. In its Search Central documentation, the company states that **you do not need to create new machine-readable files, AI text files or special markup to appear in AI features**. Brands that want to test llms.txt can do so as an **additional experiment**. Brands that use it as an excuse not to fix information architecture, **content quality and indexability** are starting at the wrong end of the problem.

The lesson is simple: structured data remains useful where it genuinely adds structure; new file proposals can be interesting; but **the biggest gains still come from well-executed fundamentals**.

In 2026, the winning brand is rarely the one with the most tactics. It is the brand with the most consistent information.



9. From answer to action: *the rise of agentic commerce*



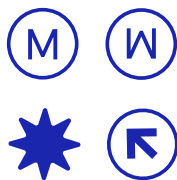
Where SEO revolved around discovery for years, and GEO today is strongly centered on answerability, **commerce is gradually moving toward execution**. OpenAI positions ACP, the Agentic Commerce Protocol, as **the infrastructure layer between merchants and shoppers in ChatGPT**. Its documentation states that ACP enables ChatGPT to process structured catalog data, understand merchant inventory and show relevant products in context. The related product feed specification emphasizes **current pricing, availability and seller context**.

Google is moving in the same direction. In the UCP documentation, Google describes the Universal Commerce Protocol as **an open standard for the future of commerce**, designed to enable **agentic actions in AI Mode and Gemini**, starting with direct buying. Google explicitly connects this to existing **Merchant Center feeds and checkout integrations** within its AI surfaces.

For many brands, this is not yet a channel with immediate scale. **But the strategic direction is now official and public**: structured product data is becoming more than an SEO or shopping optimization. It is becoming **a condition for being buyable inside AI interfaces**. For retailers and catalog-driven brands, **commerce readiness therefore belongs on the roadmap already**, even if the revenue impact is still limited today.



10. What this means for brands and Marketeers



The biggest strategic mistake of 2026 is to think that GEO is only a content adjustment. In reality, this shift **touches the entire go-to-market layer**. SEO teams need to work more closely with **brand, PR, social and commerce**. Content strategies need to shift from **isolated articles to thematic knowledge clusters**. SMEs and founders become more important, because expertise needs to be visible and citable. And measurement needs to move beyond a purely traffic-first logic.

For Marketeers, this also means a different proposition. The client question is no longer only: "How do we rank higher in Google?" It becomes: "How do we make sure our brand is **chosen, cited and trusted** in a landscape where answers increasingly appear before the click?" That requires a model that brings **technology, editorial strategy, distribution and data together under one visibility strategy**.

In that sense, **GEO is not a new trick, but a maturity test** for marketing organizations. Brands that already had their **knowledge, category position and proof points** in order now gain an additional advantage. Brands that relied for years on **thin landing pages, generic copy and isolated channel execution** will see the new interfaces **expose their weaknesses faster**.



Conclusion

The central trend of 2026 is **not the end of SEO**. It is the **end of SEO as a ranking-only discipline**. Search is being split into **three layers**: the **index layer** where pages are found, the **answer layer** where models select and summarize sources, and the **transaction layer** where agents increasingly act on behalf of users. Google confirms that the **fundamentals of SEO remain relevant for AI features**; OpenAI and Google show that structured commerce data is becoming more important in buying flows; and external studies show that **click behavior and citation logic are structurally changing**.

For brands, the task is therefore clear. **Do not optimize only for findability, but for answerability. Do not publish only content, but proof. Do not build only pages, but knowledge structures. And do not measure only traffic, but influence.**

In the answer economy, the winning brand is ultimately not the one that shouts the loudest. It is the one the model can most easily trust.



Andras Vandersteen
managing partner

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