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The new rules of search

How GEO and AI are
reshaping online
discovery

INTRODUCTION

Generative Engine Optimisation, or GEO, has quickly become one of the most talked-about developments in marketing, PR and communications. Since emerging as a major trend in 2025, it has sparked no shortage of debate, speculation and, at times, confusion.

Part of the challenge is that GEO sits at the intersection of several disciplines. Search, content, PR, digital marketing and artificial intelligence are all converging at once, making it difficult to separate genuine shifts in behaviour from industry hype.

Yet the underlying story is relatively simple. As more people turn to platforms like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and Perplexity to research questions, compare providers and explore complex topics, the way organisations are discovered online is beginning to change.

This primer is designed to cut through the noise. Rather than focusing on predictions or buzzwords, we'll explore what GEO actually is, how AI search is influencing user behaviour, and why visibility increasingly depends on a combination of authority, expertise and trust. Most importantly, we'll examine the practical steps organisations can take today to strengthen their presence in an AI-powered search landscape.

Because while the technology may be new, many of the principles that drive visibility are reassuringly familiar. The challenge isn't learning an entirely new discipline. It's understanding how existing communications, content and search best practices are evolving for a new era of discovery.



“The future of search may be powered by AI, but its foundations remain authority, expertise and credibility.”

WHAT IS GEO?

In simple terms, GEO is the practice of increasing the likelihood that your brand, expertise and content will be discovered, referenced and cited within AI-generated responses from platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Google AI Overviews.

Over the past couple of years, the discipline has acquired no shortage of labels. AI SEO, LLM SEO, AEO (Answer Engine Optimisation) and GAIO have all entered the conversation as practitioners have tried to describe a rapidly evolving landscape. Today, however, GEO has emerged as the most commonly accepted umbrella term.

The problem is that much of the discussion has focused on drawing distinctions between GEO and SEO, often presenting them as competing disciplines. This has created unnecessary confusion and, in some cases, a misleading perception that AI visibility requires an entirely new approach to digital discovery.

The reality is far less dramatic.

GEO is not a replacement for SEO. It is an evolution of many of the same principles. Visibility still depends on authority, expertise, trust and relevance.

The difference is that organisations are now optimising not only for search engines to rank their content, but for AI systems to understand it, trust it and incorporate it into the answers they generate.

Viewed through that lens, the divide between SEO and GEO largely disappears. Both are ultimately pursuing the same goal: helping the right audiences discover credible, useful information at the moment they need it.

“The most common misconception about GEO is that it replaces SEO. In reality, it builds upon it.”



GEO VS SEO

Despite the tantalising nature of this headline, GEO and SEO aren't mutually exclusive and this simple misunderstanding has led to strategic confusion.

The debate has been couched in language that would make you believe you needed to stop your SEO work in favour of GEO work. But that's not the case.

SEO is foundational to GEO. There is no one or the other. GEO was grounded in search data and built on a dataset that was itself generated by SEO.

So, unless AI companies can find a way of unpicking themselves from the very foundations of search engines, then the two will always remain interlinked.

Now that the research and the data are coming through, the practical aspects of this are becoming more apparent - reinforcing the understanding that SEO and GEO best practices are very similar. Albeit with some slight adjustments, because GEO is having a huge impact on search patterns and behaviours.



CHANGING BEHAVIOURS

Google still holds the absolute search monopoly. Let's make that clear. But in 2025, its market share dropped to below 90%.

Then, in September 2025, ChatGPT became the most downloaded app in history. Things were starting to shift. But the biggest shift of all was happening to search traffic.

It was rapidly disappearing.

Google Search without AI overview = 34% zero click

Google Search with AI overview = 43% zero click

Google AI Mode = 93% zero click

Google's own AI mode was becoming so effective at answering queries at the top of the fold, people started to stop scrolling down. They stopped looking at the Search Engine Results Page (SERP).

The most significant traffic drops were in Google's full AI mode. Rising zero click searches led to a global slump in web traffic, barely a brand went unaffected.

Even some of the biggest sites in the world - like the renowned Hubspot blog - lost millions of clicks and visitors.

But something equally strange was happening as well, searches were getting longer...

“Zero click searches are when a user gets an answer to their query without clicking on a link in the Search Engine Results Page (SERP).”

WHY LONGER SEARCHES MATTER

One of the reasons GEO has generated so much debate is that many people observed a change in search behaviour without fully understanding what's happening behind the scenes.

Take a query like "What's the best CRM for a scaling B2B business with a small marketing team?" A few years ago, a user might have arrived at this answer through a series of searches: comparing CRM platforms, researching options for B2B businesses, exploring marketing automation features and reading reviews. Each search refined the question and added another layer of intent.

In AI search, that journey is increasingly compressed into a single, conversational query.

The result is not a single answer to a single question. It's a synthesised response to dozens of underlying questions. This is why longer, more nuanced searches are having such a profound impact on visibility.

To be surfaced by AI-powered search experiences, brands increasingly need to demonstrate expertise across an entire topic ecosystem, not simply rank for an individual keyword.

So it's no longer enough to answer one question well. You need to provide the breadth of evidence, authority and context required to answer all of the related questions hiding within it.

That's the real significance of the fan-out model. AI search isn't expanding the number of questions users ask.

It's collapsing them into one and that's what's really changing discoverability.

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Through query fan-out,
Google turns a single
search into multiple
contextual searches
running simultaneously.”





UNDERSTANDING SEARCH INTENT

For years, search behaviour has largely been explained through intent. Behind every search sits a goal. Sometimes people want to find a specific website. Sometimes they're researching a problem. Sometimes they're actively comparing providers before making a decision.

These intentions usually fall into three broad categories:

Navigational Intent

A user already knows where they want to go. They might search for HubSpot blog, Apple or Microsoft. It's a search that helps them to a destination they've already decided upon.

Informational Intent

A user wants to learn. They are exploring a challenge, researching options or trying to understand a topic, like "How does GEO work?" or "What makes a good digital PR campaign?"

Commercial Intent

A user is evaluating solutions. They are comparing providers, reviewing options and considering a purchase. These searches can get very specific like, "best cloud software solution for mid-market businesses."

AI search initially gained traction as a tool for exploration and learning, but increasingly it supports commercial decision-making as users become more comfortable entrusting AI with recommendations and comparisons.

AI search is changing how people make decisions.

Rather than visiting multiple websites to compare information themselves, users increasingly ask AI platforms to synthesise answers, evaluate options and recommend next steps.

As trust in AI grows, these interactions are expanding beyond research and discovery into supplier evaluation, product comparison and purchasing decisions.

DISCOVERABILITY IS EVERYWHERE

One of the biggest mistakes organisations make when thinking about GEO is assuming the conversation begins and ends with AI platforms.

AI systems learn from a vast ecosystem of information spread across the web. News publications, Reddit discussions, awards and reviews, YouTube content, LinkedIn posts, podcasts, research reports, industry forums and community conversations all contribute to the wider information landscape.

In other words, discoverability now happens everywhere.

If people are discussing you and your industry on Reddit, that conversation matters. How you appear in news media matters.

If experts are sharing insights on LinkedIn, that matters. If trusted creators are reviewing products on YouTube, that matters too.

Visibility in AI search is the result of visibility across the wider digital ecosystem.

This is why GEO is fundamentally a communications challenge. Because success depends on being present in the places where expertise is shared, debated and referenced.

The goal is not simply to appear in ChatGPT.

The goal is to become impossible to ignore wherever your audience seeks information

So... how do you do that?

COVERAGE IS KING

For years, PR professionals have argued that reputation, credibility and third-party endorsement influence discoverability. AI search proves this now.

Rand Fishkin has long suggested that brands win visibility not simply because of what they publish themselves, but because of what others say about them. Research from Ahrefs supports that view, showing that branded web mentions, branded anchor text and branded search volume are among the strongest factors associated with AI Overview visibility.

At its core, GEO is a communications challenge. The more frequently your organisation is referenced in authoritative, relevant publications, the stronger the signals AI systems can use to understand who you are and why you matter. But that doesn't mean chasing coverage for coverage's sake.

Quality matters far more than quantity. A handful of mentions in trusted, contextually relevant publications will often do more for your authority than dozens of low-value placements.

But media coverage is only part of the picture. Those third-party endorsements create trust signals that strengthen your wider digital presence, yet AI platforms still need evidence from you. They need useful content, original insight, proof points and expertise that can be cited and referenced.

In other words, earned media opens the door, but your content gives AI systems something to quote once they're inside.



CONTENT MATTERS

One of the biggest misconceptions about GEO is that it's driven by a single tactic. In reality, visibility in AI search is usually the result of a much broader content ecosystem.

AI platforms are constantly trying to answer a simple question: who knows what they're talking about? The way they do that is by evaluating the signals surrounding your content. Is it written by people with genuine expertise? Does it demonstrate experience? Is it referenced by credible sources? Can its claims be trusted?

These principles are often summarised through Google's E-E-A-T framework: experience, expertise, authority and trust - a principle SEO tactic - while the technology behind AI search is evolving rapidly, those fundamentals remain remarkably consistent.

There's also a practical consideration. Much of the web is filled with outdated, neglected content.

Regularly updating, refining and improving your most valuable assets signals that your knowledge remains current and relevant. Equally, content that no longer serves a purpose can sometimes do more harm than good.

And finally, think beyond a single format. Expertise can be demonstrated through articles, video, podcasts, research, webinars, social content and more. Each contributes another signal, another proof point and another opportunity to reinforce what you're known for.

**“Context also matters!
The strongest idea rarely exists in isolation, it connects ideas, research, people, brands and sources to create a richer understanding of a topic.”**



THE POWER OF ENTITY ASSOCIATION



An entity can be a brand, person, product, company, location, organisation or concept.

The challenge is not just getting AI systems to recognise that your organisation exists. It's helping them understand what your organisation should be known for.

Think about the strongest brands in any category. When people hear "HubSpot", they think inbound marketing. When they hear "Salesforce", they think CRM. When they hear "Patagonia", they think sustainability.

These associations have been built through years of consistent messaging, coverage, content and conversation.

AI systems develop similar associations. The more frequently a brand is connected to a particular topic across trusted sources, the more likely those relationships are to be recognised and reinforced.

This is why GEO extends far beyond website optimisation.

Every media mention, expert comment, podcast appearance, research report, speaking engagement and industry conversation helps strengthen the connections between your organisation and the topics you want to own.

The goal is not simply to increase visibility.

It's to increase the likelihood that AI systems associate your brand with the subjects that matter most to your audience.



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AI platforms don't simply analyse pages. They increasingly interpret the world as a network of connected entities.



IS YOUR SITE OPTIMISED FOR VISIBILITY?

Search engines and AI-powered search platforms need to understand exactly what your content is about, who it is for, and why it can be trusted.

Clear page titles, descriptive headings, logical site structure and well-organised content help both traditional search engines and AI systems interpret your information accurately.

Make sure every page focuses on a clear topic, uses meaningful H1 and H2 headings, and answers user questions directly. Content that is easy to navigate and understand is more likely to be surfaced in both search results and AI-generated answers.

Poorly structured content can make it harder for search engines and AI platforms to identify important information, even when the content itself is valuable.

Modern search engines and AI platforms favour content that is easy to understand, trust and reference.

Use clear answers, concise explanations, structured formats such as lists and tables, and support claims with evidence, expertise and real-world experience.

Demonstrate authority through original insights, case studies, expert commentary and clear author or company information.

Combined with structured data and strong technical SEO foundations, this makes content more likely to be surfaced, cited and recommended across both traditional search results and AI-generated responses.

“Visibility depends on more than rankings. Your content must be understandable, trustworthy and easy for AI systems to cite.”

SEARCH IS CHANGING

Conversations aren't 'replacing keywords and SEO isn't going anywhere. But things are changing.

People are increasingly asking AI platforms complex, conversational questions rather than conducting multiple searches.

In the face of reducing clicks, AI-generated answers are reducing website visits and creating new routes to discovery.

This means authority is one of your most important visibility factors, brands earning trusted media coverage, expert recognition and third-party validation are more likely to appear in AI-generated results.

The opportunity is now.

GEO remains an emerging discipline, giving organisations a valuable head start before AI visibility becomes a crowded battleground.

Search is experiencing its most significant shift in more than two decades.

As AI transforms how people discover information, visibility increasingly depends on a combination of expertise, authority and trust, not rankings alone.

**GEO may be new, but it
doesn't need to be scary.**

If you'd like to find out more about how we can guide you through this new age of AI-powered search and help bring your digital PR strategy into the modern age, then get in touch.

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