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STRATEGY

The Two-Channel Reality: Winning Google and AI Search at the Same Time

By Scott Tischler · July 30, 2026 · 8 min read

For fifteen years, "search strategy" meant one thing: Google. You ranked, or you didn't. That world is gone. It didn't collapse overnight, and Google didn't disappear, but the ground underneath every discovery strategy has split into two channels that behave differently, reward different work, and are moving in opposite directions.

I run into founders every week who think they have to pick. They ask me whether they should "switch" from SEO to AI optimization, as if one replaced the other. That's the wrong question, and in 2026 it's an expensive one. The right frame is what I call the **two-channel reality**: traditional search is still the larger channel, AI answer engines are the faster-growing one, and you have to compete in both simultaneously because your customers now move between them without thinking about it.

The numbers that force the decision

Let me lay out where things actually stand in mid-2026, using the ranges that industry estimates and reports are converging on. I'm giving you approximations, not false precision, because anyone quoting these to three decimal places is selling something.

Traditional search is still enormous. Google still handles the overwhelming majority of global search volume, holding somewhere around **89% search share** by most 2026 estimates. But two things are true at once: that share is slowly declining, and the experience itself is changing underneath it. **AI Overviews** now appear in roughly **25% of searches**, which means a quarter of Google results already answer the question before a user clicks anything.

Meanwhile the AI channel has gone from novelty to habit. **ChatGPT reports around 800 million weekly active users** and drives the majority of AI referral traffic that businesses are starting to see in their analytics. **Perplexity** sits around a 6-7% slice of the AI search conversation and punches above its weight with research-heavy and commercial queries. Industry reports in 2026 estimate that roughly

37% of consumers now begin at least some of their searches with an AI tool rather than a search bar.

The growth rates are the part that should change your planning. Traditional search volume is projected to decline gradually over the next several years. AI-driven search is growing at triple-digit percentages year over year, and the overall AI search market is already measured in the tens of billions of dollars.

What the data actually tells you to do

Here's the trap. The AI channel is growing fast, so the temptation is to pour everything into it. But it's still the smaller channel by absolute volume. If you abandon traditional search to chase AI, you're walking away from the majority of today's demand to capture a minority of it that happens to be growing. That's not strategy, that's a bet.

The opposite trap is just as costly: treating AI search as a fad and staying 100% invested in classic SEO. That's how you wake up in 2028 invisible to the fastest-growing discovery surface on the internet.

The answer is neither. It's both, weighted deliberately.

The two channels reward different things

The reason you can't just "do SEO harder" and call it AI optimization is that the two channels are optimizing for fundamentally different outcomes.

Traditional search is a **traffic channel**. Google's job is to send a user to a page. Your job is to be the page it sends them to. Success is measured in clicks, sessions, and rankings.

AI answer engines are a **citation channel**. ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google's own AI Overviews don't primarily want to send the user away. They want to answer the question in place and, ideally, cite the sources they used. Success there isn't a click. It's being the source the model quotes, names, or recommends inside the answer. This is the heart of **Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)**, and it's why the metric that matters is shifting from traffic to **citation-based visibility**.

Here's a side-by-side of how the two channels differ in practice:

Dimension	Traditional Search (Google)	AI Answer Engines (ChatGPT, Perplexity, AI Overviews)
Primary unit of success	Ranking and clicks	Citations and mentions inside answers
What the user gets	A list of links to choose from	A synthesized answer, sometimes with sources

Dimension	Traditional Search (Google)	AI Answer Engines (ChatGPT, Perplexity, AI Overviews)
Core metric	Organic traffic, position, CTR	Share of voice in AI answers, citation frequency
Content that wins	Comprehensive, keyword-aligned pages	Clear, structured, quotable, well-attributed claims
Trust signals	Backlinks, domain authority, E-E-A-T	E-E-A-T, corroboration across sources, entity clarity
Volume in 2026	Larger, slowly declining	Smaller, growing triple digits YoY
Time horizon of value	Established, predictable	Compounding, increasingly decisive

Notice the overlap in the trust rows. **E-E-A-T** — experience, expertise, authoritativeness, trustworthiness — matters in both columns. That's the good news: some of your best work pays off in both channels at once. The content that ranks well and the content that gets cited are cousins, not strangers. But they aren't twins, and the differences are where most businesses lose.

How to allocate effort without guessing

I get asked for a magic split — "should it be 70/30?" There's no universal number, because the right allocation depends on where your buyers already are. But there is a method.

Start by measuring your own channel mix

Before you allocate a dollar, look at your analytics for AI referral traffic. Most platforms now let you segment or at least identify referrals from ChatGPT, Perplexity, and similar tools. If you're already seeing meaningful AI-sourced visits, that channel is live for your category right now and deserves real investment. If it's a trickle, you have a little more runway on traditional search — but not much, and the trajectory only goes one way.

Build the shared foundation first

The smartest money goes into work that pays off in both channels simultaneously. That's your priority tier:

- **Clear, factual, well-structured content** that states claims plainly and backs them with evidence. Models quote clarity; Google rewards it too.
- **Strong entity and authorship signals** — who you are, what you're known for, and why you're credible. Both channels increasingly resolve "who is the authority on this" before deciding what to show.

- **Structured data and clean technical hygiene** so both crawlers and model retrieval systems can parse you accurately.
- **Genuine expertise and firsthand experience** in your content. This is the single hardest thing for competitors to fake and the single most durable advantage in both channels.

Then invest in channel-specific tactics

On the traditional side, keep doing the SEO fundamentals that still move the majority of traffic: topical depth, internal linking, page experience, and earning authoritative links. On the AI side, focus on being **quotable and corroborated** — concise answers to real questions, consistent facts about your business across the web so models see the same story from multiple sources, and presence in the third-party places (reviews, directories, industry publications) that AI tools draw on when they synthesize a recommendation.

The mistake I see most often

The biggest error isn't picking the wrong channel. It's assuming the two channels are one channel and that winning one automatically wins the other. They're correlated, not identical.

I've watched businesses with excellent Google rankings discover they're nearly invisible in ChatGPT because their expertise was buried in unstructured, hard-to-quote pages and their brand facts were inconsistent across the web. I've also seen the reverse: companies that get cited well by AI tools but neglect the technical SEO that still captures the majority of buyers who search the old way. Both left money on the table by treating a two-channel problem as a one-channel problem.

The other mistake is chasing the growth rate and ignoring the base. Triple-digit growth is seductive. But you serve customers today, and today most of them still start on Google — even if a quarter of those searches now answer themselves before a click. Fund the present while you build for the future.

What winning both looks like

A business that has this right shows up when a customer types a query into Google **and** when that same customer, an hour later, asks ChatGPT for a recommendation. It's cited as a source inside an AI Overview **and** ranked in the blue links beneath it. Its brand facts are consistent enough that every model tells the same story about who it is and what it does well.

That's not two separate campaigns bolted together. It's one strategy with a shared foundation of expertise and clarity, plus targeted tactics for each channel's mechanics. The foundation is the leverage. The tactics are the finish.

The companies that internalize this now — while AI search is still growing into its share and the citation game is still winnable — will own their categories in both channels for years. The ones still arguing about whether to "switch" will find the decision was made for them, by their customers, one query at a time.

Key takeaways

- ② Traditional search still commands the majority of volume (~89% share for Google) but is slowly declining, while AI search grows at triple-digit rates — you must compete in both.
- ② The channels reward different outcomes: Google is a traffic channel measured in clicks; AI answer engines are a citation channel measured in mentions and quoted sources.
- ② E-E-A-T, clarity, and structured, factual content pay off in both channels — invest in that shared foundation first.
- ② Measure your own AI referral traffic before allocating; the right Google-vs-AI split depends on where your buyers already are, not a universal ratio.
- ② The costliest mistake is treating a two-channel problem as one channel — strong Google rankings do not guarantee AI visibility, and vice versa.
- ② Fund the present (Google's larger base) while building for the future (AI's faster growth); don't abandon either.

Frequently asked questions

Should I switch from SEO to AI optimization?

No. This is the wrong framing. Traditional search still drives the majority of discovery, so abandoning it means walking away from most of today's demand. The right move is to compete in both channels with a shared foundation and channel-specific tactics.

What is the difference between SEO and AEO?

SEO (search engine optimization) aims to rank a page so Google sends traffic to it. AEO (answer engine optimization) aims to make your content the source that AI tools quote, cite, or recommend inside their answers. SEO optimizes for clicks; AEO optimizes for citation-based visibility.

How much of search still happens on Google in 2026?

Industry estimates put Google's search share at roughly 89% in 2026, though that number is slowly declining and the experience is changing — AI Overviews now appear in about 25% of searches, answering many queries

before a user clicks.

How many people use AI tools for search now?

Reports in 2026 estimate that around 37% of consumers begin at least some searches with an AI tool. ChatGPT alone reports roughly 800 million weekly active users and drives the majority of AI referral traffic businesses are starting to see.

How should I split effort between Google and AI search?

There's no universal ratio. Start by measuring your own AI referral traffic. Then fund a shared foundation — clear, expert, structured content — that pays off in both channels, and layer channel-specific tactics on top based on where your buyers actually are.

What content works for both channels at once?

Clear, factual, well-structured content backed by genuine expertise and firsthand experience, with strong authorship and entity signals and clean technical hygiene. Models quote clarity and corroboration; Google rewards the same things through E-E-A-T.

Is AI search big enough to justify investment yet?

Yes, especially because it's still winnable. The AI search market is already measured in tens of billions of dollars and growing at triple-digit rates year over year. Businesses that build citation-based visibility now will own that channel before it becomes crowded.

If I rank well on Google, am I also visible in ChatGPT?

Not necessarily. Many businesses with excellent Google rankings are nearly invisible in AI tools because their expertise is buried in unstructured pages and their brand facts are inconsistent across the web. The channels are correlated, not identical, and each needs deliberate attention.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.