



Illustration generated by Canva AI

Leaving Vanity Behind

How **AI** is Changing the
Way Your Customers
Use the Web

A Forum Communications White Paper | Summer 2025



White Paper

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Mirror Mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?



This famous line from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is something that most, if not all, of us are familiar with. The Evil Queen was always looking to make sure that no one could be more beautiful in all the land...of course until Snow White.

In the digital marketing space where I've spent most of my career, the mirrors we used to measure our efforts were pretty simple. We focused for years on how many people came to the website, how did they get there, and what did they do once they arrived. It was easy. And, more visitors made us feel more popular and, frankly, we liked that and, so did our clients.

We also cared about search rankings and placement. How much traffic came from each source? #1 rankings plus more traffic meant winning. And, still, simple.

Then, more data. Social media metrics. Google Ads. Geofencing. Youtube views. And, now, Google Analytics 4 with the ability to even import data into your web data for further tracking. And yes, it's much more complicated, but, more traffic and more data meant better.

We've always understood that up was good, down was bad, and we typically knew

why these things happened. **But, over the past 6-12 months, things have changed.**

We started to notice that website traffic from sources that should be up...were down. We would see clients begin to rank in the top 3-5 positions in search engines, but traffic from search engines would decline. However, other indicators inclusive of key events, conversions, and sales would be up from those same channels! It simply did not make sense. It was as if someone broke the mirrors we had been using for years. It was starting to become difficult to explain to clients because the change was rapid. Others in marketing that we consider friends and experts were seeing similar issues. It wasn't just us.

With such bizarre behavior, the Forum digital team decided it was time for a deep dive into what was happening. We reviewed the data from over 50 clients to gain a better understanding of the current marketplace, our work, and to predict what's next in digital marketing. What we found isn't all that shocking, but it verified something that I learned some time ago when it comes to marketing: Brands are in. Vanity is dead. Let's see if you agree.

Thanks for reading.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Kastner'.

Nick Kastner
Director of Brand and Digital Strategy

The Past Twelve Months

On December 6, 2023, Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced the release of Google Gemini, the “most capable and general [AI] model we’ve [Google] ever built.” This powerful AI platform was released live into search on May 14, 2024. Users seeking what we would refer to as “informational” searches could receive the answer without ever visiting a website. Some of the initial responses weren’t great but have gotten better over time.

Now, this isn’t to say that the web hadn’t already begun to change. Google’s introduction of featured snippets (you may know them as the section that says “People Also Ask”) initially changed search behavior as it pushed traditional organic results down on the page. Voice search platforms also utilized early versions of artificial intelligence among others.

Another shift occurred in November 2022 when ChatGPT was released. This launch created a boon for AI platforms with a race to see who could get to market next. Microsoft invested in ChatGPT, Google rushed its platform to market, and a variety of others saw fast launches. Marketers began relying on platforms like ChatGPT and others to write blog posts, web content, and social media posts. AI-generated video and voiceover tools found their place in social media video and on YouTube. A keen eye early on could tell the

difference, but if you weren’t familiar with video or the writing style of these platforms, you might not know! Recent studies show that usage of AI-written content for your website isn’t bad, it just needs to be edited and humanized to provide value to the end user, not just search engines.

What has been most surprising has been the adoption rate of AI. One study called “The Rapid Adoption of Generative AI” found that by August 2024 39% of the U.S. population ages 18-64 had used generative AI and that 24% of workers used it at least once in the week prior to being surveyed. One in nine stated that they used it every day. This would equate to nearly 40% of consumers adopting or using AI in just the past TWO YEARS.

And while these tools are being more frequently used, they still have not overtaken traditional search. The

most recent data from ChatGPT, currently the most widely used AI engine, receives around 37.5 million requests per day. Compared to Google’s 14 billion daily requests, there is still a 373x gap in usage. However, the discussions are much more conversational in ChatGPT. And, Google still remains king as it maintains just under 90% of the total search market.

**Google was
used 373x
more than
ChatGPT in
2024**

Nonetheless, all current studies regarding the release of Google’s AI Overview show that the Overview’s launch is driving a direct reduction in organic search-related website traffic. One study by Amsive showed that Google’s AI Overview alone decreased organic search traffic click-through



rates on average by 15.49%. Their study also showed that the Healthcare and Education industries could expect the largest declines in organic search traffic. A similar study by Forrester suggested that retail website owners could expect a decline of 15% to 50% in organic search traffic. This drop in traffic would be driven by a loss in searches with informational intent. Informational searches are searches for knowledge - asking questions related to definitions, how to do certain things, or searches that are not related to doing something. These searches frequently use words or are related to

“what” is something, “why” something occurs, or “how” to do something. Google argues that removing traffic to websites from these types of searches makes site visitors more relevant and more valuable as those visiting websites have a higher propensity to convert.

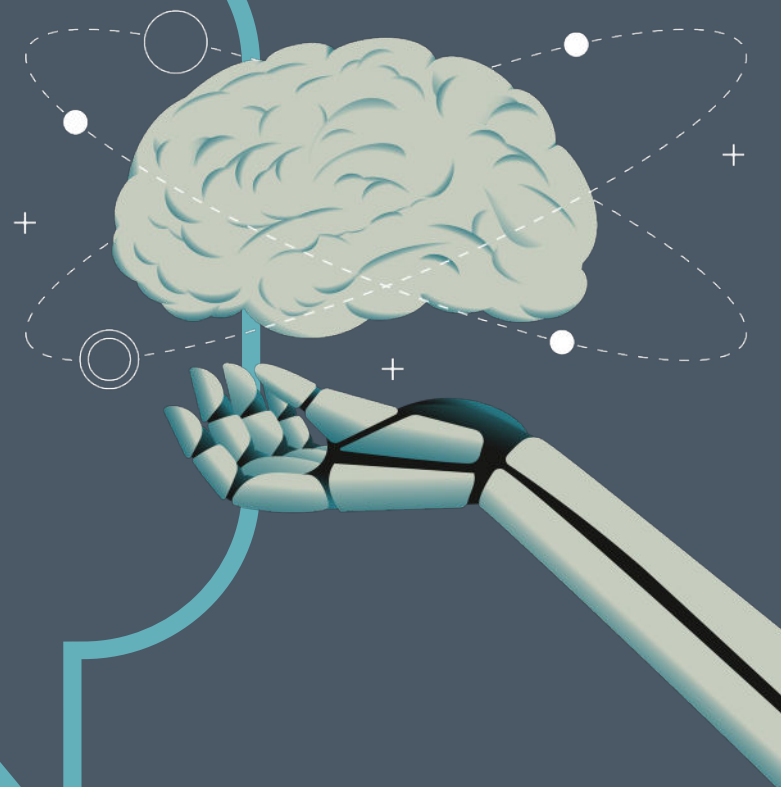
This change is problematic for SEO agencies as historically many agencies use informational searches to drive knowledge leadership and thus brand awareness for their clientele, including Forum. Consider a pest control company that may hold all top positions for searches on the different

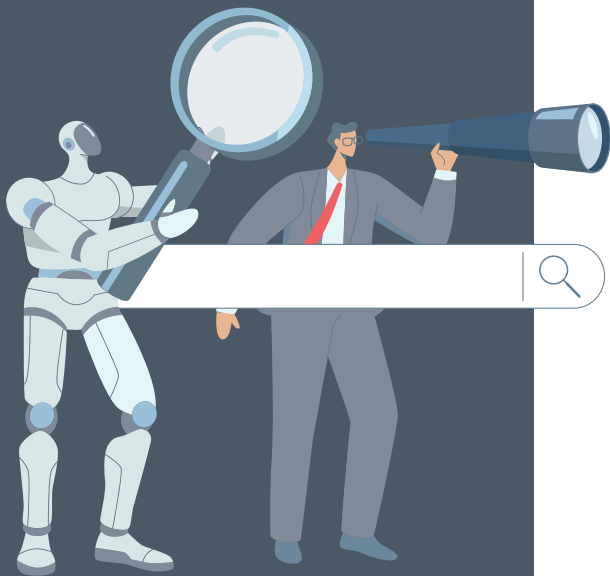
types of bugs in a region. This builds brand awareness for the company as it positions them as knowledge leaders. Now Google provides a response and only shows them as a reference.

**Declines of
15% to 50%
in organic
search traffic
due to Google
AI Overview**

Did You Know?

In a June 2025 study, researchers from MIT measured brain-wave activity in students as they wrote essays using just their brain, search engines, or Large Language Models (LLMs like ChatGPT) to write an essay. The study indicated that use of LLMs limited the use of their brain where use of search or just their mind saw higher brain-wave activity. Most concerning was that use of LLMs may lead to low levels of brain-wave activity, indicating that use of artificial intelligence may make us cognitively lazy or may even reduce brain activity. The question is, will AI make us like automatons over time like in the movie “Wall-E”?





The Zero Click Revolution

Zero Click Searches are searches where a user completes a search within Google or otherwise, but gets the answer they are seeking within the search engine results page.

Thus, the user has no need to visit a website for more information. In research and data collected by SparkToro, Google answers roughly 60% of searches without a click. Thus, these users are no longer being driven directly to an organization's website. 27.2% of queries actually end without any additional user interaction. That's one in three people who are no longer actually clicking anything after their initial search. If that's the case, why would a user need to visit a website unless they were REALLY interested?

Search engines aren't the only platforms where we are seeing fewer clicks from users. Almost ALL social media platforms give priority to posts without links or don't even allow the user to share a link (Instagram). They want users to stay on their platform – not visit your websites. And, last but not least, LLMs and other AI platforms like ChatGPT don't necessarily care about links and aren't trying to send traffic out to other websites. Thus, this idea of clicks and traffic as a measure of success may be slowly going the way of the dinosaur - extinct.

This doesn't, however, indicate that there's no value in these platforms or even in a website. Google's argument is that users will get more value from their search and will be more qualified once they arrive on site. But, for clients (and marketers) who are so used to tracking clicks and traffic for success, we needed to know how this was affecting OUR CLIENTS. Our team has tried to sort through and understand these changes and explain what we were seeing in the industry to our clients. As you can see, it's complicated.

Thus, we decided to do our own study to see what's happening...

Google answers roughly

60%

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27.2%

of queries actually end without any additional user interaction.



Hypothesis

With all of that said, here's what we do know...

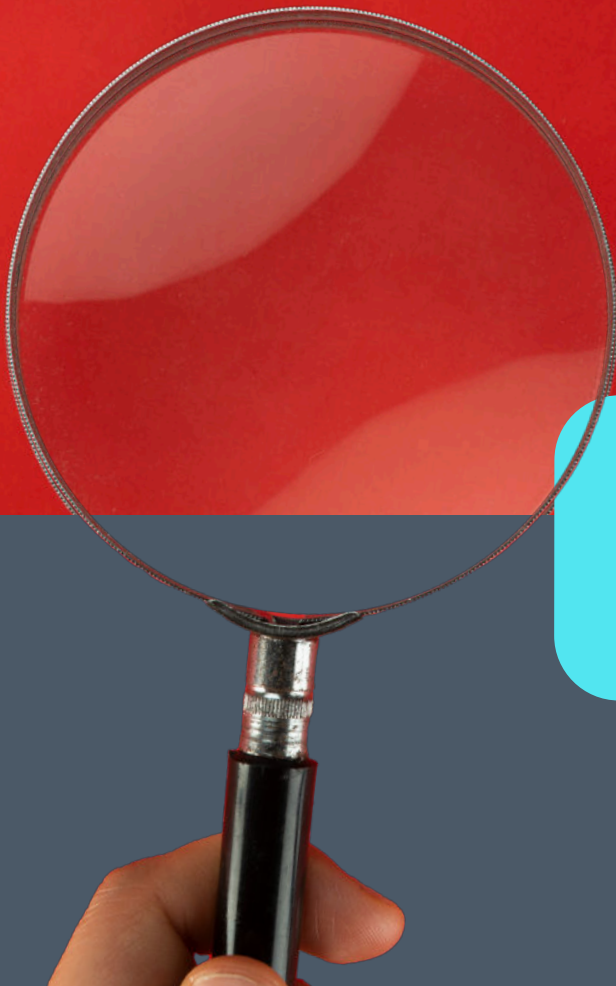
Between these facts, the data we were seeing for our clients and the buzz online about zero-click search, the Forum digital team decided to take a deep dive into our own data to see what this means for not just each client – but all clients. We started with these facts and these questions:

Consumers are getting more answers directly from the search engine without ever visiting a website;

Consumers are getting more answers directly from social media without ever visiting a website;

Consumers are watching more video content across channels than ever before;

Consumers are beginning to trust platforms like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Perplexity and others for answers to their questions.



How is user behavior changing for our clients?

What is, and will be, the purpose of a website moving forward?

Is there still value in search engine optimization and what does it accomplish?

The Study

Forum's digital team analyzed 50 websites and their related Google Analytics 4 data over an 18 month period.

These websites varied by industry and were primarily in the areas of healthcare, home services, B2B, non-profits, and government/community organizations. Only 58% of the websites analyzed were developed by Forum's team. Of the 50 sites analyzed, 28% of the websites are clients where Forum Communications manages their ongoing search engine optimization (SEO) efforts but may not have developed the initial website.

Our analysis looked at year over year trends and several metrics that we have traditionally tracked for clients.

In addition to Google Analytics 4 (GA4) data, we also looked at data from 26 websites using Google Search Console, Google's free service that allows us to monitor a website's presence in Google Search results.

The data was analyzed in its entirety and divided by industry. Outliers do exist throughout the research due to data anomalies (spikes in traffic due to bots, changes in key event tracking, or changes in the political environment that may have affected the business). Those are removed and noted within the findings for transparency.

We also separated the data based on whether Forum provided ongoing search engine optimization (SEO) services for the website. For those that are SEO clients, Forum constantly reviews those sites for opportunities for user experience improvement as it relates to SEO signals. Our hope was that our efforts in SEO would positively affect the outcome of the data findings.

50

Websites analyzed





Findings

Of the 50 websites analyzed in GA4, we found that overall website traffic dropped **2.34%**. Of those, the industry impacted the most from the change in user behavior has been B2B organizations as their overall traffic dropped **139.37%**.

Traffic, in and of itself, says very little about what users are accomplishing.

Note: Two SEO clients were removed from all traffic-related datasets - one removed due to traffic anomalies related to a change in the macro-environment that impacted traffic and a second due to bot traffic in Q1 2024. One additional SEO client was removed from pageview data due to anomalies following a merger. Other non-traffic data sets were not affected by these issues.

Within the data set, and from national studies, our expectation was that those in healthcare, B2B, finance, and education would be the ones most affected with the growth of AI. These industries frequently use information to drive interest to their products and services. We also know that Google is replacing many information-based searches with its AI Overview, as already discussed. As an example - do a search for “*what is commercial laser engraving*”. While brands in this space do rank below the AI Overview, the immediate response at the top of the page provides the user an answer to the question with a list of references. This provides a brand impression, but likely not a click as the user’s query is answered in its entirety.

Our data set also looked specifically at those websites that Forum provides SEO services for and those that we do not. Forum clients who received SEO services saw relatively little change in their traffic in the first two quarters of 2025 (-0.65%) while those who do not receiving SEO services from Forum saw a drop in total traffic of 3.36%. Traditionally, overall traffic has been a measure of success for some organizations, but it’s not telling in any meaningful way. Traffic, in and of itself, says very little about what users are accomplishing.

Digging into individual traffic sources, we found that the average decline in organic search traffic across all sites was 4.88%. Only one industry from our initial data set saw a significant increase in organic search traffic (Government / Community websites).

As noted earlier, the expected drop in organic search traffic click-through rate has been commented between 15% and 50%. In our data, we found that Forum clients actually did see a more significant drop in organic search traffic (-10.84%) than those that did not actively work with Forum in search engine optimization (-1.39%). This seemed counterintuitive, as we’ve traditionally used these traffic counts as the way we measure success, and our clients historically have significantly outperformed sites that do not utilize SEO strategies. Further analysis was needed.



Now, at this point in our study, we'd be remiss not to point back to the very title of this study: **Leaving Vanity Behind**. One of the tenets of digital marketing since its creation has been the ability to track our results. Tracking began with hits and clicks, then pageviews and so on. However, because of the availability of data - we can sometimes become obsessed with tracking the WRONG things.



One of those “wrong” things is traffic - as traffic is kind of like counting the number of people who visit your brick and mortar store. Then - tracking how they got there - organic search, direct, etc. - is similar to a survey simply asking them how they found us. And while it's helpful, it doesn't tell the full story.

If organic search traffic has declined, what types of queries declined?

Across all sites, we found that homepage visits (-8.09%) and information-related pages (-13.17%) declined year over year in the first two quarters of 2025. However, we saw a 9.57% increase in product or service-

related page visits. Even more telling is the data regarding SEO efforts.

Websites who were NOT using Forum for ongoing search engine optimization saw declines across the board within their top 10 pages visited including a drop of 13.72% in homepage visits, -9.71% in information-driven pageviews and -9.73% in product or service-related pageviews.

For those who do use Forum as their SEO agency, an increase of 5.07% in homepage visits, 18.27% decline in information-centric pageviews, and an incredible 52.55% increase in product or service-related pageviews.

52.55% increase in product or service-related pages for Forum SEO clients in 2025

Data related to information-related pageviews is not surprising. The drops noted in these categories are roughly in line with expectations in the drop in organic search traffic for most sites. In addition, a larger decline for those focused on SEO in this category

should be expected because these sites actively created content for users targeting informational search intent. What is most intriguing, however, is that those sites that actively work on SEO efforts seem to drive much higher increases in product or service-related pageviews. If this holds true, Google's assumption that AI Overview will drive higher quality users may actually be true as digital marketers hold product and service-related pageviews at a higher value than those just seeking information.

So, this would lead to another question: can SEO efforts provide an offset in terms of driving real value in conversions or other trackable metrics?

Across the websites analyzed, just over half utilize key events - a metric in GA4 that tracks various conversion values. These can range from eCommerce purchases to form completions to newsletter signups and more. Because of the variation across these sites, and how key events can be added to at any time, we wanted to only look at sites where we knew the data was accurate and where key events were actual conversions for sales leads and/or eCommerce purchases. Only 18 websites qualified for analysis in this category. These websites were evenly split between SEO (9) and non-SEO (9) clientele.

For those that do actively utilize Forum for their SEO efforts, these websites saw an increase of 26.03% in key events. Those that do not utilize Forum saw a decrease of -5.69% in key events. If key events are the new metrics, or group of metrics that matter, then SEO efforts do provide a direct correlation to



value.

Forum SEO clients saw an increase of 26.03% in key events

So, what about those searches with information intent? Can they still provide value?

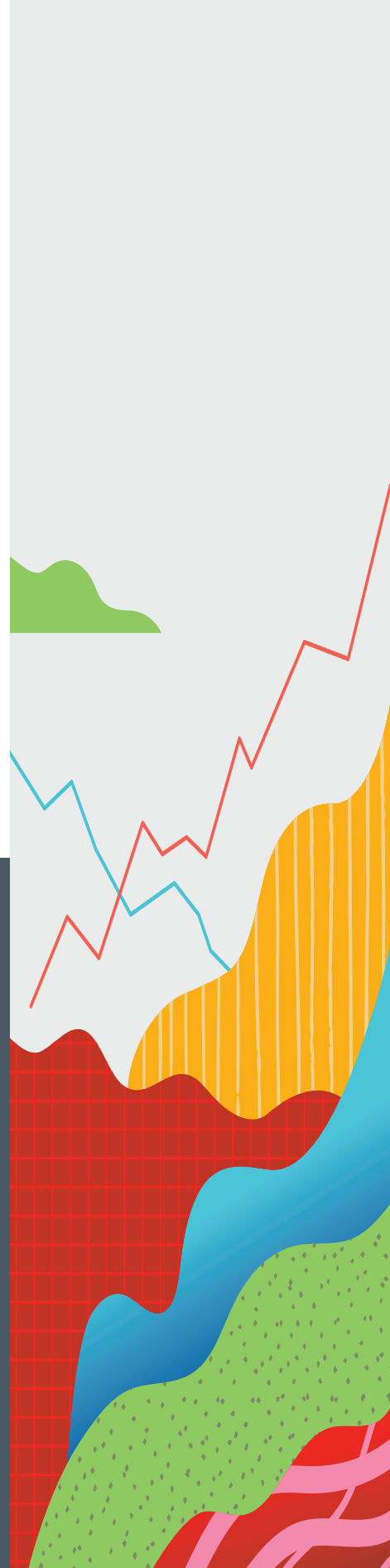
In our study, we also analyzed 26 websites that actively use Google Search Console for search-related analysis. Outside of a single website, the number of clicks across industries

and websites declined anywhere from 2% to 88% year over year in the first two quarters of 2025 from standard Google searches while only a single website saw a decrease in how frequently they appeared in Google Search Results.

On average however, sites that actively worked with Forum on SEO efforts saw no change in the number of clicks while those that did not utilize Forum saw a drop of over -12% in clicks. More importantly, **websites that did not partner with Forum on SEO efforts saw an increase of 35.65% in total impressions in search where Forum's SEO clients saw an increase of 69.07%.**

In conclusion - what we learned:

- Our data is in line with national data;
- Organic search traffic is down across all websites analyzed but traffic declined more if SEO efforts were pursued;
- The decline in organic search traffic seems to be related to information-related searches as those pages are the ones that received the largest declines (and more so for sites with active SEO efforts over the past year);
- For those sites pursuing SEO efforts, product page views AND key events are up;
- And, those sites that actively pursue SEO efforts receive a nearly **2x increase** in the number of times they appear in Google search results.



So, What Does This Mean?

You may recall that we started this study by asking *three questions*.

How is user behavior changing for our clients?

The data indicates what is being said across the digital marketing landscape: users are visiting websites less frequently for information. If they do visit, the users are frequenting more product and service related pages - which are of higher value and have a higher intent to convert or purchase. This likely means less traffic to blog posts, more traffic to product pages, and overall higher engagement rates.

Is there still value in search engine optimization and what does it accomplish?

Regarding SEO efforts, the data indicates that the homepage, product/service pages, and conversion-oriented pages will be viewed more often in this new age of the web. It also indicates that blog and informational content still matter, but for different reasons.

Those who are actively working to increase the amount of knowledge

they share on their websites or across platforms will show more frequently in responses for LLM / AI platform queries. In our own research when asking ChatGPT about what company or organization to work with in a particular industry (and related location), it recommended Forum SEO clients frequently. Why? Our SEO strategies have been focused on sharing our client's knowledge. Therefore, these sites "answer the questions" that users ask regarding their industry or that consumers frequently ask. Plus, they understand the value of brand. Strong brand identities have always found value in SEO efforts.

In a study done by SEOZoom, brand queries are less affected by AI Overviews. Where some have focused solely on building content for search engines, building content that builds brand integrity, equity, and provides high value to users will always be more valuable. The goal should be to build recognition, trust, and provide value to influence consumers' choices before they click - not just when they click.



"Traffic simply indicates behavior but is not, and should not be, a measure of success."



Also, where for years SEO stood for search engine optimization, we'd advocate for the new acronym mentioned by some industry leaders – search everything optimization. It is no longer that digital marketers optimize for just websites – but for ANY platform that has a search function. This includes everything from Google to Instagram, ChatGPT to YouTube, and anything and everything in between.

What is, and will be, the purpose of a website moving forward?

We do not believe the purpose of a website has changed. A website is now

one of the locations where your brand can be experienced and IS the only digital platform you can fully control. Websites likely hold more value than ever before in terms of driving the final conversion for many consumers. So, if you are in any industry where collecting contact information or generating a sale is the purpose of your website – then you still need a website. However, the metrics we've used to measure success are, and should be different.

Historically, we've used "traffic" as a measure of success, however, this is misleading in the next iteration of the web. Moving forward, traffic simply indicates behavior but is not, and

should not be, a measure of success. It is simply a "vanity" metric – a metric that makes us feel good when it's up, but it actually doesn't mean that much in terms of actual leads, sales, or value for most websites and even social media channels.

Moving forward, we would advocate for metrics that provide value to the end user for website tracking. Things like engagement rate, key events (conversions), time on site, and more. Plus, tracking impressions within Google Search Console among other platforms like Meta (Facebook / Instagram), YouTube and future platforms will also provide significant value in the future of digital analytics.



Leaving Vanity Behind



Measuring your organization's digital marketing success based on ANY metric that serves as a collective count of website visits, followers, etc. is simply vain. It's like looking in the mirror to ask how beautiful you are today knowing you didn't wash your hair or take a shower that day.



What matters today is not traffic, but conversion, value, engagement, and influence. We've known that our end goal has always been conversions and sales, but that's not in a vacuum. Increasing the value of content across platforms will increase influence. And, influence / brand awareness / whatever you may want to call it now all lead to future sales. These are the metrics that matter and what we're all experiencing is that effect across all of marketing. The idea of brand awareness has been understood since the advent of marketing, but influence is a relatively new term.

So, in marketing – what is influence? It is brand equity. It is ensuring that consumers know your name, who you are, what you stand for, and the value you provide to them. And, the tools and executable tactics to drive influence and brand equity are, and will be, how you do “search everything optimization” well. While there are certainly technical items to execute, **here's what we believe that the data leads us to:**



1. Brand first

Every organization that we work with needs a consistent brand voice across channels so consumers know who they are clearly. This calls for high quality products and services, high quality content, and a clear message. The data states clearly that organizations with stronger brand positions easily outperform and outpace those that do not.

2. Websites are conversion tools

Websites are the conversion point online. These locations must be beautiful, functional, and capable of converting BEFORE driving prospective customers to these sites. Broken and poorly structured websites lead to poor final results. And, content across pages should be reviewed frequently and updated to provide even higher value to the consumer.

3. Traffic as a metric is dying

With fluctuations in how consumers see your content online, digital analytics is more complicated than ever before. Traffic as a measure is still usable, but fluctuations may or may not indicate anything of importance and can simply be vanity. Custom dashboards are needed to ensure we're tracking the right things and constantly optimizing what we're tracking to better understand what's happening on the web.

4. Zero-Click Marketing is Real

All organizations now have multiple homes on the web – their website, social media, press releases, podcasts, videos, search results, etc. Users no longer have to visit a website to receive meaningful connection to your brand. They may visit your website to convert (or not) but they definitely have access to you. Organizations need to take advantage of all of the marketing channels their prospective consumers use. A website and social media isn't enough – marketing campaigns must be multi-channel and integrated. No more are the days of using only a single channel to drive long-term value.

5. Influence Matters

Every person in your target audience that sees your brand receives an impression. Every view, every interaction, every logo seen, every article read, every video watched. To build influence in your space, you need consistent impressions from your target audiences. More quality brand impressions means more influence. More influence, if it provides value, should directly lead to an exchange of value, thus sales. A variety of sources on the web claim that ChatGPT and Perplexity pull their responses primarily from Wikipedia, Reddit, and websites that were ranking on page 3 or lower in Google. Why? Because those sites have either crowd-sourced approval for their responses or leadership-style content that answer the question well. They pull information from brands that have influence.

Changing the Web

In June 2025, one of Forum's clients launched a new technology at a major trade show. The goal was to claim ownership of the name of this technology via the release and to build excitement for future product releases. In a simple search for the technology's name ONE WEEK LATER, Google had indexed the press release and the Instagram video that contained no voice over – only music and scrolling text – into an AI Overview response. Google's AI utilized these two sources – the press release and the text that was in the video – to pull together a detailed explanation of the technology. But why so quickly? Because this client has influence online and is a trusted entity.

In simple terms, we come back to what we as marketers have always known: it all comes down to delivering value, building brand recognition, and communicating to the right audiences with the right message at the right time. The digital landscape has amplified the importance of brand recognition and influence as key drivers of consumer behavior and long-term business success and impacts search across not just Google - but all platforms. In a crowded and fast-moving online marketplace, brands that are easily identifiable and consistently visible build trust, foster loyalty, and command higher perceived value. Moreover, influential brands shape trends, drive engagement, and create meaningful connections with their audiences across platforms. As such, investing in strategic brand-building efforts—through content, custom and strategic design, and digital presence—is not just beneficial but essential for any organization seeking to grow and remain competitive in today's web-driven economy and search marketplace.



Other Resources

<https://blog.google/technology/ai/google-gemini-ai/>

<https://blog.google/products/search/generative-ai-google-search-may-2024/>

<https://ctstate.edu/images/Forms-Documents/AI-presidential-fellows/The-Rapid-Adoption-of-Generative-AI.pdf>

<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai>

<https://www.brainonllm.com/>

<https://sparktoro.com/blog/why-do-we-need-zero-click-marketing/>

<https://www.forrester.com/blogs/4-ways-to-mitigate-the-impact-of-falling-traffic-on-retail-websites/>

<https://seoprofy.com/blog/is-ai-content-good-for-seo/>

<https://www.amsive.com/insights/seo/google-ai-overviews-new-research-reveals-how-to-navigate-click-drop-off/>

<https://www.seozoom.com/web-traffic-data-analysis/>

