AI Content Didn’t Stop Working, Your Metrics Did via @sejournal, @MattGSouthern

Everyone in the industry is going through the same thing right now.

Your content team ships a solid asset, but traffic stays flat or declines. You pull up the analytics, see the line trending sideways, and conclude that AI content has stopped working.

That verdict is often wrong. The data may be accurate, but the numbers don’t reflect what the content is good at.

By changing what you measure, you may find your content is performing better than your analytics suggest.

The Problem

In the first four months of 2026, 68% of U.S. Google searches concluded without a click, based on SparkToro’s analysis. That’s an increase from 60% in 2024. The increase in zero-click searches is driven largely by AI Overviews and people conducting more searches without leaving Google.

Ahrefs published an analysis of click-through data that initially estimated that AI Overviews reduced clicks to the top result by 34.5%. When they re-evaluated with new data, the forecast for the top position was 58%.

The question now is what teams do about it.

Why The Data Stopped Working

For 20 years, traffic was a good indicator of successful content. When a page was valuable, Google directed people

there, and your analytics recorded that visit. Since value and traffic often correlated, you could infer one from the other.

Now, traffic and value are disconnected. Search Console shows clicks, impressions, and average position, but it doesn’t differentiate between clicks from a traditional search result, an AI Overview, or AI Mode.

Google expanded its AI results with more link options without providing websites with insight into their visibility. As a result, when clicks decrease, it’s unclear whether AI Overviews are absorbing the traffic, if rankings dropped, or if people are reading a summary of your content without clicking.

A declining click rate doesn’t necessarily indicate fewer people are engaging with your content. Seer Interactive discovered that although the brand-cited Overview CTR dropped 61% from one quarter to the next, the number of clicks on those pages remained nearly unchanged. The decrease in rate was due to impressions increasing faster than clicks.

Google refers to the clicks eliminated by AI Overviews as “bounce clicks“, or quick visits where people find a fact and then leave. Liz Reid, Google’s head of Search, may be right. The issue is that Google measures how often people return to Search, reflecting Google’s retention, not the value of your content. Publishers don’t have a way to measure clicks from AI surfaces, and until Google provides one, any positive spin is simply a claim.

What we do know is that when an AI Overview is displayed, people click on a result about 8% of the time, compared to 15% without it. Only 1% click on a link within the Overview itself. These are actual losses, but the same searches still expose your work to people who never click.



What's Actually Happening To "Failed" Content

An analysis of approximately 846,000 search sessions found that people slow down when an Overview is displayed. They scroll, go back, revisit listings, and carefully consider options on the results page before making a decision. The search result page now performs more of the functions that used to be handled by a landing page.

A randomized field experiment found that when AI Overviews appear, they cut outbound organic clicks by 38%, yet self-reported satisfaction was unchanged whether the Overview was shown or removed. If the lost clicks had been only low-value bounces, satisfaction would likely have dropped when the summaries disappeared. It didn't.

Seer discovered that cited pages receive roughly 120% more clicks per impression compared to uncited pages in AI Overview results. GWI data indicates that frequent AI search users also tend to click on sources more often. Half of daily users click a citation, while only 14% of occasional users do.

These studies' findings depict an audience that evaluates, compares, and sometimes makes decisions in areas where your analytics can't track them.

What To Measure Instead

Keep an eye on branded query volume and direct traffic, as they're signs of influence that don't necessarily result in clicks. When your content generates demand that you can't

immediately capture, it can often appear later as someone searches for your name or visits your URL.

Next, monitor your presence on AI surfaces. When available, Search Console's generative report shows impressions for AI Overviews and AI Mode, while third-party tools estimate citation points. Google combines clicks from these features with your total Search data, so you can't separate them. An impression occurs when your page link appears, but it doesn't indicate if your content influenced the answer.

Since fewer people are clicking, those who do are more likely to be further along in their decision process. Measure their actions after landing, such as reading depth, repeat visits, newsletter signups, and conversions, as these metrics provide more insight than just session counts. For example, a page with half the usual traffic but twice the conversion rate is succeeding at its goal.

Rand Fishkin's advice is to build a correlation dashboard rather than a single traffic key performance indicator. This involves plotting your publishing schedule alongside branded search, direct, and conversions, and watching how they move together. It's softer than a clean attribution number, and closer to how influence travels now.

Measuring influence is a separate job from reporting it. At Search Engine Journal, we recently examined the reporting aspect, explaining to a CFO why traffic is low but revenue remains steady. This piece is about the step before that: seeing what your content did in the first place.

To report on the content that contributed to revenue, you first need visibility into it, but Google's default dashboard doesn't display this information.

There's no clear way to measure influence yet, and claiming otherwise would be misleading. What you get is triangulation, multiple imperfect signals that, when combined, offer more

insight than traffic data alone.

What This Looks Like By Category

AI Overviews mainly handle informational and research queries. Branded, local, and high-intent transactional searches perform better in organic search, the categories that SparkToro indicates still benefit from SEO.

In ecommerce, buying guides and “best of” pages are most affected because they directly answer the Overview question, while product and category pages continue to convert.

Publishers face the most challenges, and discussing influence feels empty when decreased traffic leads to lower ad revenue. The most vulnerable visitors are the ones relying on search, whereas loyal readers who visit directly or via your app are less likely to be caught by the Overview.

How To Respond

If people click through from an Overview to a page that contains the same summary they’ve already seen, they may leave. Based on GWI’s analysis, it helps to add an extra layer to your pages, something the AI cannot produce from your existing text. This could be an interactive chart, a video, or a free download.

Another way to win is to write content people will remember after they leave. Memorable content is good for inspiring branded searches later, even if it doesn’t capture immediate conversions.

Be careful not to retire pages based solely on traffic. Before removing a page that has lost clicks, verify if it’s still referenced and if branded demand has shifted during its active period. A page can decline in traffic but still serve a purpose.



What To Do Next

You can't choose what to write next based on a number that doesn't reflect what your content succeeds at. You have to change what you measure, which is more difficult than interpreting a line on a graph.

The new signals are more chaotic, partially undeveloped, and move more slowly. However, they answer the right question: whether your efforts are genuinely reaching people and influencing their actions.

Join our live webinar on Thursday, July 9 at 2 p.m. ET to learn more about what to do when your content stopped working.

More Resources:

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https://www.searchenginejournal.com/ai-content-didnt-stop-working-your-metrics-did/580976/