

Google's Mueller Weighs In On SEO vs GEO Debate via @sejournal, @MattGSouthern

Google Search Advocate John Mueller says businesses that rely on referral traffic should think about how AI tools fit into the picture.

Mueller responded to a Reddit thread asking whether SEO is still enough or whether practitioners need to start considering GEO, a term some in the industry use for optimizing visibility in AI-powered answer engines like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity.

"If you have an online business that makes money from referred traffic, it's definitely a good idea to consider the full picture, and prioritize accordingly," Mueller wrote.

What Mueller Said

Mueller didn't endorse or reject the GEO terminology. He framed the question in terms of practical business decisions rather than new optimization techniques.

"What you call it doesn't matter, but 'AI' is not going away, but thinking about how your site's value works in a world where 'AI' is available is worth the time," he wrote.

He also pushed back on treating AI visibility as a universal priority. Mueller suggested practitioners look at their own data first.

Mueller added:

“Also, be realistic and look at actual usage metrics and understand your audience (what % is using ‘AI’? what % is using Facebook? what does it mean for where you spend your time?).”

See also: AI Search Changes Everything – Is Your Organization Built To Compete?

Why This Matters

I’ve been tracking Mueller’s public statements for years, and this one lands differently than the usual “it depends” responses he’s known for. He’s reframing the GEO question as a resource allocation problem rather than a terminology debate.

The GEO conversation has picked up steam over the past year as AI answer engines started sending measurable referral traffic. I’ve covered the citation studies, the traffic analyses, and the research comparing Google rankings to LLM citations. What’s been missing is a clear signal from Google: is this a distinct discipline, or just rebranded SEO?

Mueller’s answer is consistent with what Google said at Search Central Live, when Gary Illyes emphasized that AI features share infrastructure with traditional Search. The message from both is that you probably don’t need a separate framework, but you do need to understand how discovery is changing.

What I find more useful is his emphasis on checking your own numbers. Current data shows ChatGPT referrals at roughly 0.19% of traffic for the average site. AI assistants combined still drive less than 1% for most publishers. That’s growing, but it’s not yet a reason to reorganize your entire strategy.

The industry has a habit of chasing trends that apply to some sites but not others. Mueller’s pushing back on that pattern. Look at what percentage of your audience actually uses AI tools before reallocating resources toward them.

Looking Ahead

The GEO terminology will likely stick, regardless of Google's stance. Mueller's framing puts the decision back on individual businesses to measure their own audience behavior.

For practitioners, this means the homework is in your analytics. If AI referrals are showing up in your traffic sources, they're worth understanding. If they're not, you have other priorities.

See also: Ahrefs Launches Tracker Comparing ChatGPT & Google Referral Traffic

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