

The Shift From Search Sessions To Decision Sessions via @sejournal, @DuaneForrester

This one started with a question from Adorján-Csaba Demeter, a subscriber in Romania, who asked how big the behavior change could be after Google's AI Mode Personal Search launch, and it pushed me to think past the product announcement and into the habit shift underneath it.

AI changing search is a foregone conclusion. The real story is what happens to people when search stops acting like a library and starts acting like a helper that knows what you meant, what you like, and what you have coming up next.

When effort drops, behavior changes first. Then business models change. Then the web scrambles to catch up.

Image Credit: Duane Forrester

What Google Actually Changed

Google did not just add another AI layer to results. It moved AI Mode from “answer from the web” toward “answer from the web plus your life,” starting with opt-in connections to Gmail and Google Photos for AI Pro and AI Ultra subscribers in the U.S., delivered as a Labs experiment.

That detail matters because it tells you what Google thinks the next battleground is.

Not faster answers, but stickier habits.

When the system can read your hotel confirmation in Gmail, it

can plan. When it can see the kinds of trips you take in Photos, it can recommend. You stop doing the work of explaining context. You start delegating outcomes.

That is a bet on human behavior.

The three behavior shifts that will most likely follow, in order, are:

1. People ask more questions, and they ask harder questions.

Google already sees this pattern with AI Overviews. In major markets like the U.S. and India, Google says AI Overviews drive over a 10% increase in usage for the types of queries that show them. That is a habit signal, not a satisfaction claim.

When people believe the system will do more for them, they return more often, and they push further. Queries get longer. They get more specific. They get more outcome-oriented. People stop asking “what is” and start asking “what should I do.”

Personal context amplifies that shift. If the system already knows your reservations, your preferences, and your recent activity, the user has less friction and more confidence. That increases question volume.

2. Sessions end sooner, and fewer decisions happen on websites.

Here’s the part businesses need to internalize. AI does not just reduce clicks. It compresses the journey and ends sessions earlier.

Pew’s browsing-panel study found that when an AI summary appeared, users clicked a traditional search result in 8% of visits versus 15% when there was no AI summary. Pew also found users were more likely to end their browsing session after a page with an AI summary, 26% versus 16% without.

3. People shift from browsing to delegating.

This is where behavior becomes durable. Traditional search trained people to open tabs, compare sources, build their own plan, then act. AI Mode personalizes the plan inside search itself. It turns “find me information” into “help me decide.” If the system can use your life context, it can do the assembly work you used to do manually.

That is the transition from *search sessions* to *decision sessions*. A search session ends when you find information. A decision session ends when you have a recommended next step and you are ready to act.

Adoption Will Be Real, And Uneven, For A Simple Reason

People like convenience, but they do not always like the feeling of being summarized.

Pew found that among Americans who have seen AI summaries in search results, only one in five say they find them extremely or very useful. Most say somewhat useful, and 28% say not too or not at all useful.

Low-stakes categories will move fastest because the cost of being wrong is low. High-stakes categories will move slower because trust and liability show up quickly, even when the convenience is obvious.

Even with mixed sentiment, usage is already going mainstream. Deloitte’s 2025 Connected Consumer survey found 53% of surveyed consumers are either experimenting with gen AI or using it regularly, up from 38% in 2024.

The behavior change is already underway, and I think Google is trying to capture it inside its existing habit loop.

What This Does To Businesses, Even If Your SEO Is Perfect

This is where most teams get stuck. They see AI Mode and AI summaries and assume it is “just another ranking change.” It is not. It is a consumer behavior change that reshapes the economics of discovery. The shift is subtle at first, then it hits you all at once, because it changes what people consider a completed search experience.

When sessions complete in the answer layer, classic top-of-funnel traffic becomes less reliable, even if your rankings hold. The competitive line shifts to inclusion: being referenced, cited, recommended, or selected as the next step inside the plan the system generates.

To win there, build for next-step intent. Most marketing content assumes the user will land on your site and then decide. AI compresses that journey, so your content has to carry options, tradeoffs, and a clear “what to do next,” in a form that survives summarization.

Vertical Impacts, Where Behavior Shifts First

Healthcare

People already use search as a first stop for health. The Annenberg Public Policy Center found that most (79%) U.S. adults say they’re likely to look online for the answer to a question about a health symptom or condition.

And the way they search is predictable. A 2025 JMIR survey study found participants most often sought information on health conditions, 90.2%, and medication info came next, 60.3%.

As the answer layer feels more confident, people will use it for triage and next steps. It will influence which clinic they choose and how quickly they escalate a concern.

Healthcare businesses should expect:

1. Less website traffic for broad informational topics, and more pressure on “what do I do next” moments.
2. Increased competition to be the cited and trusted source inside AI answers.
3. Higher stakes for accuracy and clarity, because summarization can remove nuance.

There is also a revealing warning signal here. A study of health-related AI Overviews citations, found YouTube was the single most cited source, accounting for 4.43% of citations in that dataset.

That is not an argument against AI. It is a reminder that citation sources do not automatically align with medical rigor. Businesses in healthcare need to make their evidence, authorship, and care pathways machine-readable and unambiguous.

Financial Services

Finance is already living in an “assistant” world, and that matters because it shows how quickly consumers accept delegated help when it saves effort.

Bank of America reports that Erica (their consumer AI assistant) has surpassed 3.2 billion client interactions since its 2018 launch, and clients now interact with Erica more than 2 million times per day.

That is behavior change at scale.

Meanwhile, consumers are increasingly willing to use AI for financial advice and information. ABA Banking

Journal reported in September 2025 that 51% of respondents said they turn to AI to get financial advice or information, and another 27% said they are considering it.

Now when we connect the dots...

If AI Mode personalizes search around a user's life context, financial decision-making gets pulled earlier into the assistant layer. Budgeting questions, product comparisons, "should I refinance," "how much house can I afford," and "what happens if I miss a payment" all become conversational.

Financial services businesses should expect:

1. Increased competition for being the recommended next step, not just being discoverable.
2. More pressure to publish clear, **plain-language** product explanations that survive summarization.
3. A sharper separation between low-stakes guidance and regulated advice, with trust and compliance becoming part of how content gets used.

Retail And Ecommerce

Retail gets hit hard because the classic behavior pattern is tab sprawl, and AI collapses it into a shortlist.

Retail businesses should expect:

1. Fewer browsing sessions that start with generic research and end on a product page.
2. More "shortlist behavior," where the system presents a handful of options and the user picks.
3. Higher importance for product data that can be summarized cleanly, including dimensions, compatibility, return policies, and warranty terms.

If your differentiation lives in fluffy copy, it dies in the summary. If it lives in measurable attributes, verified

reviews, and clear tradeoffs, it survives.

Local Services

Local services are where this gets practical fast. People search when something broke, they need help now, and they do not want homework.

AI Mode personal context will steer choices based on urgency, location, constraints, and preferences. That means “best next step” routing becomes default behavior.

Local businesses should expect:

1. Less opportunity to win by content volume alone.
2. More emphasis on entity clarity, service area accuracy, availability, pricing ranges, and proof of credibility.
3. A rise in “invisible funnel” decisions, where the customer shows up ready to book because the plan already happened elsewhere.

What You Can Do Today, Without Waiting For The Dust To Settle

For Consumers

1. Decide where you want personalization, and where you do not. Personal AI is a trade. You get convenience, but you give context. Make that choice deliberately.

2. Use AI for options, then verify what has consequences. Health, money, legal, and safety decisions deserve a second look. If an answer influences a purchase, a medical step, or a contract, capture the source and key details so convenience does not erase accountability.

For Businesses

1. Stop treating clicks as the only signal that matters. Clicks will drop in many query classes, and sessions will end sooner. Measure presence in answers, citations, recommendations, and downstream conversions that happen after exposure.
2. Rebuild your content around next-step intent. Take your highest value pages and rewrite them for decision completion. Clear options. Clear tradeoffs. Clear “what to do next.”
3. Make your entity impossible to misunderstand. Clean organization signals, consistent naming, authoritative profiles, accurate locations, and structured data where relevant. When the machine layer tries to explain who you are, make it easy.
4. Publish proof, not fluff. In high-stakes verticals, show your sources, your credentials, your policies, and your constraints. AI can compress text, but it still needs real signals to anchor trust.

The Competitive Forecast, Google Versus The Rest

If AI Mode personal search takes off, the winners will not be determined by model quality alone. Distribution and habit will do most of the work.

Scenario one, Google accelerates

Google’s biggest advantage is not that it can build an assistant. It is that it can place the assistant inside a habit billions of people already have. (Android + Siri) It already sees increased usage when AI Overviews appear, over 10% in major markets for those query types.

If Google can move Personal Intelligence from paid opt-in into broader availability, and expand the connected sources beyond Gmail and Photos, it can turn search into a daily operating layer for planning and decisions. That is a habit engine.

Scenario two, the market stays plural

ChatGPT and other assistants will continue to grow because they do not live only in “search.” They live in work, writing, learning, and deep tasks. Many users will keep separate habits, one for web discovery, another for assistant workflows, at least for a while.

In a plural market, businesses must optimize for multiple answer layers, not just Google.

What To Watch In 2026

1. Whether Google keeps Personal Intelligence as a paid feature or uses it as a default habit builder.
2. Whether connected context expands, and which sources get added next.
3. Whether user sentiment shifts from lukewarm to reliant or stays mixed as Pew found.
4. How quickly session compression shows up by vertical, since that will reveal where business disruption hits first.

The Takeaway

The change to watch is not that AI can answer questions. That part is already here, and it will keep improving. The real change is that people will stop doing the assembly work they have always done in search. They will ask more, browse less, and increasingly accept plans that arrive pre-built, because it feels faster and it feels complete. Habits will change.

When that happens, power moves upward into the answer layer.

Competition shifts from who ranks to who gets included, because inclusion is what influences the decision before a user ever lands on your site. The web does not disappear, but its role changes. It becomes the dependency that feeds answers, not the destination where discovery naturally occurs.

If you run a business, you cannot pause this shift. You can adapt. Build for decision completion. Make your proof easy to carry forward so it survives summarization and still earns trust. Measure what matters when the click often disappears.

More Resources:

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<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/the-shift-from-search-sessions-to-decision-sessions/566291/>