

Your next customer may never visit your website

AI assistants increasingly answer questions directly. When the answer, not the click, becomes the shop window, positioning, content, and budgets all shift.

By Nicole Fung · Friday, October 16, 2026 · 6 min read

For twenty years, the deal was simple. Someone had a question, typed it into a search box, and scrolled a page of links. Your job was to be one of those links and to make the click worth it. That deal is quietly being rewritten.

The shift, in plain words

AI assistants now answer many questions directly, in a few friendly paragraphs. They read widely, summarize, and recommend. For a growing share of everyday questions, people get what they need without opening a single website.

The scale is now hard to ignore. Alphabet told investors in July 2026 that AI Mode, Google's conversational search, has passed one billion monthly users: "Since expanding AI Mode globally last October, we've surpassed one billion monthly active users."¹ OpenAI said at its 2026 developer conference that ChatGPT and its other products reach "our collective 1.2B weekly users."² Anthropic's Claude is smaller among consumers but growing fast: market intelligence firm Sensor Tower estimates the Claude app had more than 67 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2026, up from 9.4 million a year earlier. Among businesses, it is already ahead on one measure: fintech firm Ramp reported that 43.8% of US businesses paid Anthropic in September 2026, against 40.6% for OpenAI.³

That doesn't make websites irrelevant. It changes who reads them first. Before a person sees your brand, a machine may already have decided whether you belong in the answer.

"The answer, not the click, is becoming the shop window."

What happens to the click

The best independent data comes from Pew Research Center, which tracked the real browsing of 900 U.S. adults in March 2025. When Google showed an AI summary, users clicked a traditional search result in 8% of visits. Without a summary, they did so in 15% of visits.⁴

Clicks on the sources inside the summary were rarer still: just 1% of visits. And users were more likely to end their browsing session entirely after a page with an AI summary (26%) than after a page without one (16%).⁴

Consumer surveys point the same way. Bain & Company found that 80% of consumers rely on AI-written results for at least 40% of their searches, which it estimates reduces organic web traffic by 15% to 25%. It also found that about 60% of searches now end without the user clicking through to another website.⁵ With fewer visits to explain who you are, consistent corporate and product branding matters more than ever: the same names, claims, and descriptions everywhere an AI might look.

People are not only asking for facts. Bain found that roughly 68% of users of AI chat tools rely on them for researching, gathering, and summarizing information, and 42% ask them for shopping recommendations.⁵ Those are exactly the moments when a buyer used to land on your website.

Google's view is more upbeat. On the same July call, the company said: "we're now sending billions of clicks to websites every week through AI features in Search."¹ Both things can be true. The total stays huge, while each answer sends fewer people to any single site.

10 → 1 FROM TEN BLUE LINKS TO ONE ANSWER

A page of results gave you ten chances to be seen. An AI answer often gives you one sentence, or none. The competition is no longer for position; it is for inclusion.

What it means for your brand

If an assistant describes your category, does it mention you? Does it describe you the way you would? Brands with a clear, consistent story told in the same words across their own site, reviews, press, and partners are easier for machines to summarize accurately.

Brands with a fuzzy position get blurred into the category average. That is not a technology problem. It is a positioning problem that technology has made visible.

Where the summary pulls from matters too. In Pew's data, Wikipedia, YouTube, and Reddit were the most cited sources in AI summaries and standard results alike, together accounting for 15% of the sources listed in summaries.⁴ Your story is told in places you don't own, so consistency across reviews, partners, and press is part of the job.

AI answers can be wrong about you

Being included is not the same as being described correctly. In a 2025 test by Columbia Journalism Review's Tow Center, eight AI search tools were asked to identify the source of news excerpts. Collectively, they "provided incorrect answers to more than 60 percent of queries."⁶ The researchers

also found that “Generative search tools fabricated links and cited syndicated and copied versions of articles.”⁶

The tools are improving quickly, and the gap varies widely between products. Still, the lesson for brands is simple. Check what assistants say about you regularly, the way you would check reviews. When something is wrong, fix the source: an outdated page on your site, an old press release, a partner listing.

Publishers, who were among the first to feel this shift, put it well. Mark Howard, *Time* magazine’s chief operating officer, told the researchers that “it’s critically important how our brand is represented, when and where we show up.”⁶ He is also optimistic about where the tools are heading: “Today is the worst that the product will ever be.”⁶ Both points apply to any brand. The answers will keep getting better, and how you appear in them is worth managing now.

THREE MOVES TO MAKE THIS QUARTER



Rethinking the budget

None of this needs a new department. It needs a shift in emphasis: a little less effort on chasing traffic, a little more on being the clearest, most quotable source in your niche. Most of that work, from sharp positioning to useful content to consistent messaging, is what good brand strategy always asked for.

There is an upside for marketing teams. McKinsey’s 2026 survey finds that companies most often attribute revenue gains from AI to marketing and sales, ahead of every other function.⁷ The same tools that change how customers search can help your team produce clearer, better-sourced content, faster.

A practical split for the next planning cycle: keep paying for the search work that still converts, and move a slice of the content budget into fewer, better pages. Those pages answer real buyer questions with facts an assistant can quote: what you offer, for whom, at what price, with what proof.

Then change what you measure. Next to sessions and rankings, track how often you appear in AI answers for your ten most important questions, and whether the description is right. Pew found that the typical AI summary is only 67 words long.⁴ Ask yourself what your 67 words should say.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

- Ask three assistants to describe your category, and note whether and how you appear.
- Fix the gaps in your own words first: one clear positioning line, used everywhere.
- Correct wrong descriptions at the source: your site, old press releases, and partner listings.
- Add “mentioned in AI answers” to your next marketing review, next to traffic.

SOURCES

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Frequently asked questions

Do AI summaries reduce clicks to websites?

Yes, by almost half in Pew’s data. Google users who saw an AI summary clicked a traditional search result in 8% of visits, versus 15% when no summary appeared.

Can AI answers get your brand wrong?

Yes. In a 2025 Columbia Journalism Review test, eight AI search tools gave incorrect answers to more than 60 percent of queries. When something is wrong, fix the source: an outdated page on your site, an old press release, or a partner listing.

How should you measure your presence in AI answers?

Next to sessions and rankings, track how often you appear in AI answers for your ten most important questions, and whether the description is right.