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SEO Trends 2026





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SEO Trends 2026

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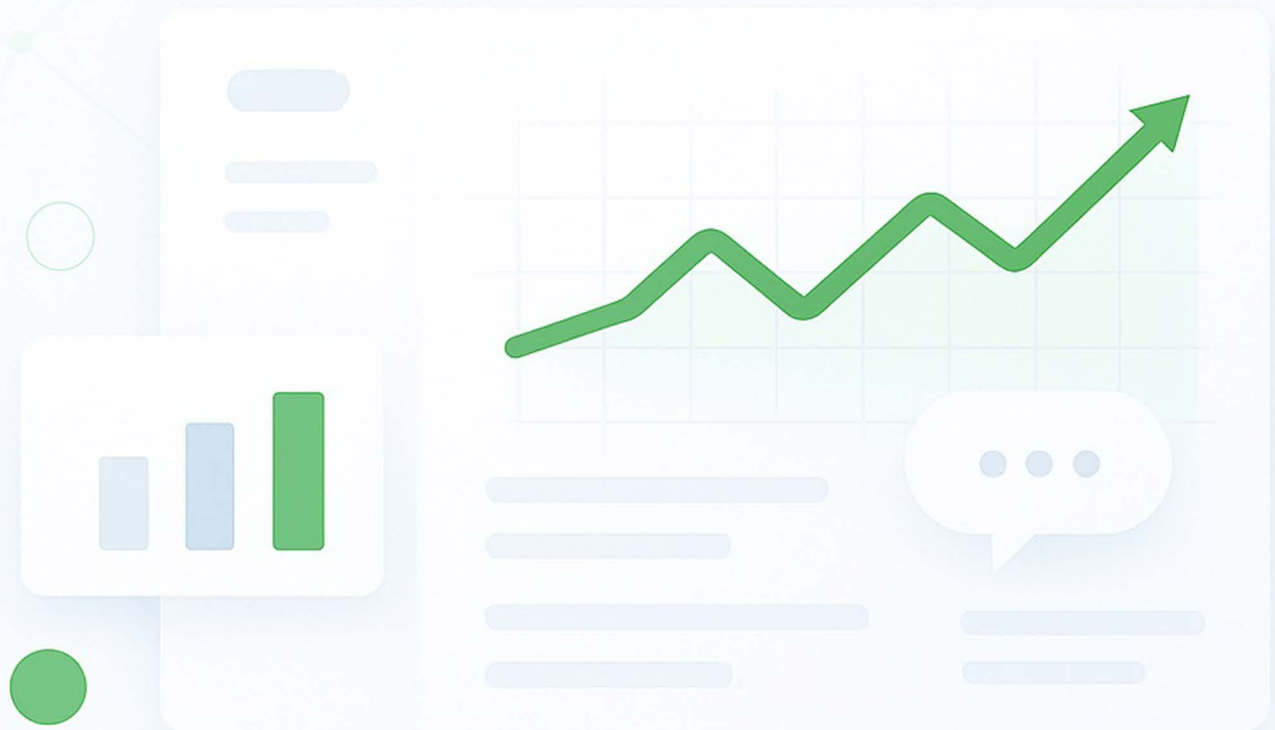


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Contents

Introduction	7
What's Working Now	8
Opportunities: Platforms and Trends	15
If You Could Only Do One Thing	21
Hot Takes	27
Fundamentals and Platform Diversification Over Hype	33

Click or tap this icon ☰ on the lower right of each page to navigate back to the Table of Contents.

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Introduction

SEO will never die, but thankfully, the crappy content marketing model is dying. The rise of LLMs, which tempted some opportunists to publish websites full of AI slop, helped kill it.

Even before generative AI became mainstream, back when ranking was relatively straightforward, a rash of content marketers mistook their timing for talent. They created low-quality content designed solely to manipulate search algorithms, and they attracted unearned page views, rather than providing genuine value to users.

When the top of the funnel was as big as the planet and hauling in organic traffic could be gained by keyword stuffing, many assumed they were great at SEO.

While this model was never true SEO, it gave the entire industry a bad name.

Anyone who has tried hiring an SEO expert will know what I'm talking about. You waded through a sea of applicants who had no idea they were underqualified. Subpar content marketing had become synonymous with SEO.

Between 2022 and 2024, the SEO industry faced dark days as Google struggled to refine its algorithm. The search engine stopped consistently rewarding helpful content and began ranking spam and AI-slop.

During this period, many SEOs continued to parrot the old advice, "Just create helpful content!" even as quality content often failed to rank. Sites like HouseFresh documented how Google's SERPs were dominated by affiliate spam and AI-generated reviews that pushed genuine expertise and first-hand experience down the page.



Katie Morton

Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

The fact is, regardless of what Google does, good marketers create genuine value for their audiences. Algorithm changes may come and go, but building trust and authority remains of utmost importance to create and retain audience share.

This ebook examines what makes good SEO work and outlast tough market and industry conditions. Now that the fog is lifting, where are SEO trends heading?

We asked our experts four questions to find out. Here is the first:

Question 1

With the rise of zero-click searches and technology changes, what are you seeing that is working? What's your best advice for gaining visibility, conversions, or other key successes in today's SEO environment?

What's Working Now

Katie Morton Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

Whenever there is a massive change in the SEO industry, there's a Wild West rush to figure out what works. We are finally at the stage where the truth is firmly out, and frankly, it's not all that surprising.

However, just because something is sort of obvious and a lot of SEOs are saying it, doesn't mean it's easy. Serve humans, not algorithms. This is a mantra of good SEOs you've already heard.

There are some important nuances to understand and apply, which you will learn more about in the next section:

- Find content opportunities AI can't cannibalize.
- Build genuine brand presence beyond lead generation.
- Discover your niche and serve that audience well.

Search Engine Journal CEO Jenise Uehara says, "Cultivating a niche audience that's hard to access, and getting advertisers to pay a premium to get in front of that audience is a bright spot in the publishing industry, and that's where we are. Publishing for a broad audience for display ads is a struggling business model."

Even if you're not working for a publishing company, the advice is similar:

"Refine your content strategy to exquisitely serve your ideal audience."

Success in SEO requires adapting to current search realities while maintaining strong marketing fundamentals.

Read on to find out from the experts what's working for them.



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Everything has changed, but also nothing has changed.

SEO has always been about a site/page/brand being found by its relevant audience and focusing on user needs to establish a connection.

That hasn't changed.

"Right now, what is working for me is to find opportunities that are not being cannibalized by AIOs, and producing content that cannot be replicated by an LLM."

For one client, I've focused on creating content where Google doesn't surface AI Overviews and requires a click-through to the site to answer user intent and fulfill needs. This is still working very well, with strong Marketing Qualified Leads (MQLs) direct from Google SERPs.

I continue to seek fresh ideas and experiment with new types of content. The industry response to SEO Pioneers and IMHO confirmed that I was aligned with my audience. Video interviews that present personal opinions and experience are the content that AI can't replicate and gains visibility across social, SERPs, and LLMs.

At Search Engine Journal, one of our main objectives is to generate newsletter sign-ups to encourage a community and engaged audience. This is the value for us as a publisher.

If you are a publisher and dependent on click volumes, then your business model is being dismantled. Much like when “new media” destroyed print publications, publishers are now in the process of navigating the demise of the click economy.

To survive, independent publishers need to find a direct audience and/or sponsorship. They also should connect content to specific business outcomes.

My best advice is to figure out how to find your audience now that has shifted, and then ensure that your brand offers consistent messaging in the right places. Classic marketing; classic SEO.

Matt Southern Senior News Writer, Search Engine Journal

“What’s working today is super-serving niche audiences rather than chasing scale.”

Clicks from search may be down, but there are still people hungry for quality content. The key is focusing on keeping those people rather than constantly acquiring new visitors.

Super-serving means diversifying your content formats. If you’re publishing articles, add newsletters, videos, or podcasts. Meet your audience where they want to consume content. Give them reasons to come back.

The zero-click trend makes this more important. When fewer people click through from search, you need direct relationships. Build an email list. Get people visiting your site directly rather than depending on search traffic. Owned audiences on platforms you control matter more than ever.

This is about loyalty through consistency. Show up regularly with content your niche cares about. Go deeper on topics your audience needs covered. Respond to their questions and feedback.

Success in this environment comes from depth, not breadth. Find your niche, understand what they need, and become the go-to resource they return to. Build something people miss when you don’t publish. That’s more sustainable than optimizing for whatever Google’s doing this quarter.

Roger Montti News Writer, Search Engine Journal

Zero-click search is a misnomer because it presumes that search results with 10 blue links are the standard. That hasn't been the case since at least 2014 with the introduction of Featured Snippets. But if you count the introduction of the Knowledge Graph panel, the date is 2012. The date when the 10 blue links started to become irrelevant actually began in 2007 with the introduction of video results in the search results.

Zero-click ignores Google Discover and ignores that consumers' content habits have changed toward consuming video content in the context of intents that used to be served by textual content. It also ignores that AI content is less aligned with keyword content and more aligned with topical concepts inherent in complex queries.

Google is still linking out to content, but it's more than just text content, and it's from a wider range of search experiences than the humble search box. AI is sending clicks to a broader set of websites for a wider range of complex questions that begin with the initial query.

The phrase "zero-click" ignores all of those tremendous changes and stubbornly looks backward toward a standard keyword-to-query, 10-link search result paradigm that no longer exists.

The major change that's become apparent is that SEO tactics like keyword-based strategies don't work anymore. This has been the case for a few years now, but it's become glaringly apparent lately because of Google's helpful content algorithms that negatively impact made-for-search-engines content.

Looked at another way, it's not that content is overtly made for search engines that negatively impacts search visibility; it's that the content is not purposely made for users.

So now, more than ever, it's important to consider what users expect to see when they land on a webpage.

For example, for an ecommerce page: Do users expect to see a bunch of products with a five-paragraph essay about the products? Or do they actually expect to see what they are looking for: images of the product plus specs, reviews, measurements, and comparisons?

The old SEO approach goes all in with the essay and neglects all the other things that an actual customer wants to see. Many SEO pros would justify an essay on an e-commerce page with the excuse that “Google wants to see it.”

Takeaway: If your reason for doing anything is based on “because Google wants to see it,” then you can bet that it’s the wrong decision.

“Strongly focus on what a user wants and expects to see.”

Identify points of friction that prevent a user from doing what they want to do or finding what they want to find, and remove those impediments.

Dan Taylor Partner & Head of Innovation (Organic & AI), SALT.agency

Genuine brand activities go beyond producing content that simply drives leads or demonstrates ROI. They focus on creating a brand presence that connects deeply with your core audience while also appealing to those on the periphery who might not yet be loyal but are curious.

This means developing narratives, educational resources, or thought leadership that communicate values, build trust, and sustain engagement over time.

Instead of chasing short-term conversions, genuine brand activity prioritises emotional connection and long-term recognition, ensuring that when audiences think about a product, service, or category, your brand naturally comes to mind.

To achieve this, brands need to use data more contextually. It is not just about tracking clicks or engagement rates, but combining insights from multiple sources to understand what drives genuine interaction.

What problems are users trying to solve? What misconceptions or knowledge gaps exist before they even reach your content? By analyzing engagement signals, user journeys, and audience intent, marketers can anticipate expectations and create experiences that meet users where they already are.

Understanding what they have likely read elsewhere or the influences shaping their perceptions, from social content to AI summaries, allows brands to communicate with greater empathy and precision.

Finally, redefining success is essential. Moving beyond last-click attribution and narrow ROI metrics means evaluating how visibility in search, AI overviews, and other discovery channels contributes to brand influence.

“The real value lies not only in the conversion event but in how SEO, content, and wider brand touchpoints shape awareness, preference, and credibility over time.”

Patrick Reinhart VP of Services & Thought Leadership, Conductor

Zero-click searches have been on the rise for years, and what's working can be boiled down into one word: consistency.

Our most successful customers:

- Consistently create high-quality, helpful, new content (and have ramped up and invested more in that effort to adapt to the new world of AI).
- Consistently monitor their sites and leverage technology to automate tedious QA processes.
- Consistently share data and educate their organizations to ensure they incorporate best practices into their day-to-day.

Most, if not all, companies that constantly chase the new shiny object of the day typically don't have long-term success.

“Create consistency in your organization and you'll win, period.”

Opportunities: Platforms And Trends

Katie Morton Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

Here is the second question I asked our experts:

Question 2

What opportunities (for example, platforms, content formats, user behaviors, advantages, techniques, or trends) should SEOs be paying close attention to, and why?

The advice I gave in last year's SEO Trends ebook still holds, and it's likely that many still standing in the industry had similar ideas.

I said then, and reiterate now: It's never been more important to diversify your traffic sources.

Expand your presence on platforms beyond Google to increase your brand's reach. Go where your users are. Learn how you can use those platforms to reach your audience and convert new users.

Brush off your content repurposing strategy to branch out onto different platforms without too much extra effort.

Collaborate with other departments and your marketing peers to help integrate content and user acquisition strategy changes company-wide.

Depending on your company set-up and size, this may require close collaboration between SEOs and other marketers on a content strategy that lives on the website, in email, and on other platforms.

"Content quality and relevance to your audience remain crucial, as always, to gain users and increase brand affinity."

When users love you, your brand, and your content, they are more likely to head directly to your website or seek you out on social media.

Concentrate on ways you can capture users on social media. For example, learn how to convert users into leads without leaving LinkedIn, Instagram, X, TikTok, or other platforms where your users hang out.

Incentivize users to go from social media to your website for a deeper dive and encourage email sign-ups.

Our experts have some great advice that drills down on how to execute some of these strategies, and other great ways to accelerate SEO performance.

Shelley Wash Managing Editor, Search Engine Journal

We now have a new visibility layer across LLMs and generative AI engines that is eating up top-of-funnel (TOFU) searches for informational queries. It's yet to be seen how much direct click value there is to be had in LLMs, but for brand awareness, it's essential you are the one controlling your brand narrative.

Ensuring you have a consistent brand message and your content is accessible to machines is the new basic level of SEO.

The integration of AI chatbots and agentic AI into daily life is going to increase. You need to understand this because where and how users search will change completely.

For example, organizing and purchasing a full travel experience, buying food for a specific recipe, or business inventory management will be generated within closed AI systems. You must consider how you get into those closed systems and assistants that will be making automated purchases.

How users research and seek trusted information online has fractured across other channels, and this has big implications for brands. Younger generations especially have reduced trust in Google SERP results damaged by sock puppet content that offers manipulated "reviews" for revenue gain.

Channels such as Reddit, Quora, TikTok, and YouTube have all become platforms that have direct influence on purchase decisions. TikTok especially has significant influence on research gathering. Google recognized this and filled its SERPs with these platforms, obscuring independent sites and pages.

“You need to know where your audience is finding its trusted information and have influence in those spaces.”

All that said, Google is not going anywhere and remains the dominant search engine and the dominant channel for traffic referral, even if that traffic is a fraction of what SEOs became used to.

The next phase of search is entwined with AI assistants and how AI is integrated into Google search results. So invest in fully understanding how these new discovery engines work and how to influence them.

Matt Southern Senior News Writer, Search Engine Journal

User-generated content platforms deserve way more attention than they’re getting from SEOs. The specific platforms vary by niche. Could be TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, Substack, or something else. This is where engagement and traffic are going.

SEOs should do two things with these platforms. First, study the conversations happening there. Understand what your audience cares about, how they talk about problems, and what questions they’re asking. That informs your entire content strategy.

Second, create content there. Go where authentic engagement already exists rather than trying to manufacture it. These platforms have distribution and community built in.

The bigger opportunity is in building owned communities where you control the platform. Owned means you own the data, the relationships, and the distribution. Examples include email lists, Discord servers, Slack communities, or Substack publications. These protect you from algorithm changes on both search and social platforms.

Contrast this with rented platforms like Facebook Groups, subreddits, or TikTok accounts. You don’t control those. The platform can change algorithms, shut you down, or disappear overnight. You’re building on someone else’s land.

“Owned communities compound over time. Early members help onboard new ones.”

The engagement creates content ideas, and you get direct feedback on what's working. It's not easy to build, but it's more sustainable than depending on platforms that change their algorithms every few months.

The cycle: participate on rented platforms to understand your audience and build awareness. Then bring engaged people to platforms you own where you control the relationship long-term.

Roger Montti News Writer, Search Engine Journal

SEOs tend to see their work as isolated from users. The work they generally do is less about engaging the site visitors and more about engaging search engines. The whole E-E-A-T debacle was at least 99% about engaging the search engines. Most SEOs will continue down that increasingly fruitless path, and that opens up an opportunity for those who want to build things that last.

Google relies strongly on user behavior signals. Users have always signaled what was authoritative, what is quality and valuable. That's the whole point of the third-party raters program: to teach machines the patterns inherent to how actual people evaluate content quality.

Building on this fact, my suggestion for an opportunity is for a business to truly engage with people, in person, if that makes sense; in other channels, if that makes more sense.

Here's an example: Years ago, I became a loyal customer to an ecommerce company because of their telephone customer service. It filled me with confidence that transactions will be smooth and resolved to my satisfaction.

The experience filled me with feelings of goodwill toward the company, and I shared that feeling with others who also became customers. I have no doubt that that company's success was built one person at a time. Eventually, they became so successful that their competitor purchased them.

"Building relationships with those who are influential, with consumers, with an audience, has long been the origin story of many successful companies."

Here are questions to ask yourself about your user interactions with your company:

- How do you make it easy to contact you?
- How can users provide feedback?
- Does the company personally respond to feedback?
- What meaningful interactions can be made?

Dan Taylor Partner & Head of Innovation (Organic & AI), SALT.agency

SEO professionals should pay close attention to changing user behaviors and the growing use of new media for finding information.

“People are increasingly discovering and evaluating brands across platforms that do not always lead directly to a website.”

TikTok, Meta AI through Facebook and WhatsApp, Google’s Gemini ecosystem, Google Lens, and AI platforms such as ChatGPT and Perplexity are becoming key parts of the modern discovery landscape.

Users are also beginning to rely on agentic layers and personal AI bots that filter and summarize content on their behalf, shifting how visibility and influence are built online.

When users do arrive on a website, they are often at very different stages of their journey, sometimes with far more context, knowledge, or intent than expected.

For example, Gen Z is Google’s fastest-growing Search demographic, and 1 in 10 of their searches now starts with Google Lens, with 1 in 5 of those carrying commercial intent.

In many cases, this aligns with what we can already see in CRM data. Users are first engaging with a brand through ChatGPT or social media before returning via other channels, such as direct or branded search.

Understanding these shifts allows SEOs to shape content and experiences that meet users where they are. This means using both quantitative and qualitative data to map the discovery and decision-making process, identifying the moments that influence trust and intent.

It also gives SEOs a chance to shift the narrative with clients, moving beyond producing content solely to improve keyword rankings or graphs, and instead focusing on the wider search ecosystem.

Success should be measured by how present and valuable the brand is at every stage of the funnel, and across every pain point, benefit, and concern.

Grzegorz Czapik Partner & Head Founder, MonitLabs

SEO pros need to shift their focus from driving website traffic to capturing and leveraging customers' attention where it naturally exists.

Why? Because traditional top-of-funnel (TOFU) content, once discovered through Google's ten blue links, is losing visibility.

People are now asking AI the same questions that your on-site evergreen and TOFU content used to answer. That doorway to your site is closing.

Now and into the future, brand discovery happens through conversations on forums, social media, YouTube, and trusted industry publications. Both humans and large language models (LLMs) read these spaces to assess your credibility, reputation, and authority. This is how they learn who you are and whether your brand can be trusted.

To stay visible, create authentic, high-quality content across these third-party platforms. Encourage discussions, reviews, and mentions that accurately represent your brand. Doing so strengthens both human perception and how AI systems interpret your business.

The line between traditional marketing and SEO has blurred. Modern SEO success depends on tracking how often people search for your brand name, how frequently your brand appears in AI-driven responses, and the volume and tone of user-generated content about your business across third-party sites.

Those who adapt to this wider, brand-first mindset in place of top-of-funnel content for Google will win the AI-era search game sooner.

If You Could Only Do One Thing

Katie Morton Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

The next question I asked is:

Question 3

If you had to give SEO professionals just one piece of advice for thriving in 2026, what would it be?

Much like myself, the experts featured in this ebook are seasoned, grizzled vets of SEO. Every few years, we've heard that SEO is either dead or dying. It's never been this close to a complete overhaul, and yet the answer to what makes good SEO always was and always will be a love story:

"Be lovable to your audience."

Obviously, if you've read this far, you know there's far more to it than that. Being lovable doesn't mean you just need to show up and look cute. You need to know what your audience is thirsting for. What is their greatest pain, and how can you ease that pain?

And of course, since we are talking about SEO, how do you find each other? And then, how do you keep your target audience coming back for more? These days, you can't trust that just because they found you once, a user can find you again. This means:

"Conversions have never been more important."

At Search Engine Journal, we're constantly running experiments to increase conversions. Small tweaks can lead to massive improvements in audience engagement and retention.

If you aren't serious about exquisitely serving your niche audience, they don't have a good reason to convert. So at the end of the day, good SEO still comes back to being lovable.

Loveability leads to conversions, but you need to make it as easy as possible for them to convert.

Go deeper into improving conversion rate optimization (CRO) so your audience can fall in love with your content, and then marry you by signing up and coming back.

Let's hear what our experts recommend to thrive in SEO.

Shelley Walsh Managing Editor, Search Engine Journal

I've experienced many developments in SEO and can confidently say that everything is cyclical, and during times of significant flux, go to the fundamentals and hold on:

"Know where your audience is finding its trusted information and have influence in those spaces."

If you embrace this core maxim, it will guide you through all the changes that Google, discovery engines, LLMs, and whatever comes next can throw at you.

However, there are also significant changes happening with technology that do influence the channels through which audiences can find us. So, I recommend you invest in understanding how LLMs work. Learn how an LLM generates an answer through prediction and understand how it lifts chunks of information.

Pay attention to how agentic SEO is developing so that you can consider now how you could apply it to your niche. Get prepared now.

Understand that the search journey has fragmented, and not all discovery happens in Google anymore. Users will research across different channels (ChatGPT, Reddit, TikTok) and then go to Google to search for brands or specific products.

Don't get caught up in pointless arguments over nomenclature or caught up in hype cycles chasing distractions. Keep focusing on what a user wants and applying your brand presence and message where they can see it. SEO is more about marketing than it has ever been.

One of the most interesting and exciting facets of SEO is that it is constantly updating, and you can never stand still. For all the time I have been in this industry, I have never been bored, nor have I been complacent. The constant learning involved is what makes this the most exciting space to work in, if not the most challenging.

Matt Southern Senior News Writer, Search Engine Journal

Don't get distracted by shiny new things.

The SEO industry moves fast, and there's always a new framework or buzzword trending, like cosine similarity. Or whatever's dominating LinkedIn this week. It's tempting to chase it all.

Even when tactics change, fundamentals remain the same:

- Quality content that serves an audience.
- Building trust over time.
- Understanding what people need and delivering it.
- Showing up consistently.

These matter more than optimizing for the latest algorithm update.

"Build something sustainable rather than constantly pivoting based on what's trending."

Believe in yourself and your work. This is a long-term game. The people who succeed are the ones who commit to a strategy and execute it for years, not months.

Yes, adapt as the landscape changes, but it's important to know the difference between fundamental shifts and temporary noise. Not every new tactic deserves a strategy overhaul.

The brands winning now are the ones that built authority before the panic started. They focused on serving their audience when others obsessed over rankings. They created owned channels when others depended entirely on search traffic.

“Stay focused. Do the work. Trust the fundamentals. You’ll outlast the hype cycles.”

Roger Montti News Writer, Search Engine Journal

Reconsider long-standing keyword-based content tactics because they can easily lead to made-for-search-engines content, which Google sees as spam. Building out content on a scaffolding of keywords that a tool tells you to write about is spammy.

The alternative is to use your expertise on what you feel users want to know. Use your understanding of the customer and audience, and how they research prior to making a purchase, to build content around that.

It’s not enough to slap a keyword phrase in the old H1 and throw in some synonyms into the content.

“The authenticity, authoritativeness, and completeness of the information provided to the user are important”

Be brief when the user requires it. Go deep when the user’s needs demand it.

Centering the content on users, not keywords, does not mean don’t use keywords. It simply means to focus every stage of the content on the user, whether it’s product content, news, or informational.

Dan Taylor Partner & Head of Innovation(Organic & AI), SALT.agency

Learn how to communicate the broader contribution and value of positive brand touchpoints, and how these moments connect Search and AI with the wider business.

The definition of success within direct channels such as organic search, paid search, email, and even direct traffic itself has evolved. These are no longer isolated performance levers, but signals of how well a brand resonates across an ecosystem of discovery.

Modern visibility strategies now depend on understanding how users move between channels, from seeing a brand mentioned in an AI summary or social post, to searching for it on Google, to finally visiting through a direct link or typing in the URL after multiple exposures to the brand.

Activities that connect Search and AI to the business often sit at the intersection of content, data, and brand strategy.

This might include mapping how AI-generated answers cite or paraphrase your content, auditing which of your landing pages appear in AI results, or analysing how SEO visibility supports sales enablement, product education, or customer retention.

It is about positioning Search as an input to wider commercial decisions, not just an output measured in rankings or traffic.

To thrive in this evolving space requires a shift in mindset.

“The best professionals I know are curious, adaptable, and focused on learning how systems connect rather than clinging to fixed tactics.”

Longevity in this field comes from balancing curiosity with clarity of purpose, understanding that technology changes but human motivations stay consistent.

What keeps me going is the satisfaction of helping others see that connection between data and decisions, and between visibility and trust.

For those coming up in the industry, the most important skill is not mastering every tool, but learning to think broadly. See beyond algorithms to the people they serve. SEO, AI, and marketing are all reflections of that same objective.

Sam Page Head of SEO, InMotion Hosting

SEO professionals who succeed in 2026 will be the ones who:

- Step outside traditional silos.
- Collaborate across disciplines.

SEO is maturing into a truly holistic marketing function.

The key to expanding your visibility and overall presence lies in building relationships with teams who have visible presence:

- Social media
- Video
- Content
- Affiliate and partner marketing
- Field marketing
- Paid search
- Data

These channels amplify each other's impact and enhance how your brand appears across every platform, **including AI and LLM search.**

In fact, our own SEO strategy now goes beyond Google to include platforms like YouTube, Reddit, and Quora. The focus is no longer just on backlinks and on-site content.

In 2026, success will depend on how well your content and messaging move across marketing channels.

This shift reflects how people search today. Lots of customers are discovering brands (even in B2B) on TikTok. ChatGPT and other conversational tools continue to reshape how users find information. Changes are accelerating, and the ability to adapt and collaborate across teams will define the next era of SEO.

Hot Takes

Katie Morton Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

The last question I posed to the experts is:

Question 4

What's your hot take or bold prediction about SEO's future?

There is a paradox afoot. The future of SEO is both entirely predictable and yet entirely unpredictable. Let me explain.

"The predictable part: the fundamentals of serving your audience with great content remain the same. The unpredictable part is Google, and how fast search fragments to other platforms."

Google used to be synonymous with search. Now, every query tests my patience. Instead of a SERP full of relevant results, I often get AI-generated interpretations of what the algorithm thinks I might want.

Despite my resistance to chatbots, I occasionally turn to competitors to find what I need.

At the time of this writing, Google's Web Guide is still in testing through AI Labs, and the results are underwhelming. I find myself frustrated with overly truncated SERPs that provide limited results.

Even when Web Guide executes a search well enough, Web Guide over-explains results through AI digests that feel untrustworthy due to the potential for AI hallucinations. Just show me the link alongside some good old-fashioned metadata.

Every time Web Guide provides results, I find myself searching for the exit. If I look closely, I can find a small button that says "classic search," and I always click on it. Of course, truly classic search no longer exists.

Obviously, in my opinion, Web Guide is not ready for prime time. However, Google's got a track record of jumping the gun, especially when OpenAI applies competitive pressure in the AI race.

Who can forget the unfortunate [“glue on pizza” in Google’s early AI Overviews](#) debacle, which will go down in SEO history. And then there was that embarrassing time Gemini’s image generator got so dedicated to representation that it accidentally un-represented a bunch of people.

Meanwhile, here comes OpenAI, breathing down Google’s neck, yet again, with ChatGPT Atlas, a browser with ChatGPT built in, which launched in October 2025 for macOS.

If Google hasn’t yet learned to prioritize quality over speed, it has a new opportunity to goof up by prematurely cramming a release out the door.

Google is incentivized to keep users on its properties at the expense of search quality. Google’s traditional search, for which it became a household name, was destroyed by Google precisely because it sent users to where they actually wanted to go: away from Google to explore the open web.

Google is likely to continue experimenting with AI features on the SERP that risk alienating users and pushing them toward alternative platforms.

Meanwhile, competitors continue to innovate, which means we may witness further diversification of how people discover content, in ways we haven’t yet imagined.

This volatility makes the advice of this ebook all the more pertinent. Keep providing value to your audience everywhere they are. That’s your competitive advantage.

Shelley Walsh Managing Editor, Search Engine Journal

I will repeat as I said earlier: Everything has changed, but also nothing has changed.

I started the SEO Pioneers series to look back at the past so we can look forward. I learned from that series that everything is cyclical, and we might think things are changing, but we face the same problems as SEO faced in those nascent years.

In 1995, there were different search engines, and discovery was often done through portals such as the Yahoo homepage, or DMOZ directory pages. They were the discovery engines of the day.

SEOs did not have a playbook or blueprint and had to experiment and share knowledge to make small advances. Some figured out how to game the system, and some recognized how using their brand or providing solutions to user needs was a sustainable way to get results.

The Florida update wiped out many businesses overnight. Hummingbird created considerable drama when it upended SERPs by introducing intent and personalisation into results. We work at the cutting edge of constantly updating technology, so we have to expect disruptors.

What we are experiencing right now is exactly the same that SEOs went through in the beginning of the industry 25 to 30 years ago. It's also what we have been experiencing for the last 25 years: constant evolution of how the game works.

Those who adapt and experiment will survive. Those who try to continue with SEO from 2017 will not.

"My hot take is that everyone is running around like the sky is falling, but it's all just SEO."

Matt Southern Senior News Writer, Search Engine Journal

My hot take is that users will shape search's future more than platforms do.

The sentiment around search quality has shifted. People add "reddit" to their queries because they trust community discussions over algorithmic results. They're seeking platforms where real people share experiences. That behavior matters.

AI-powered search features keep expanding, but adoption doesn't match the investment. Most users still prefer results where they can evaluate sources and decide for themselves.

Kevin Indig [published a study](#) that found 80% of users still click through to traditional results to verify information, even when AI Overviews appear.

This indicates personal control and source evaluation matter more than getting quick answers.

My prediction is that search changes gradually based on user behavior, not through the dramatic transformation being pushed. Better quality results matter more than new interfaces. Search companies need to fix what is showing up, not how it's showing up.

Behavior reveals where search is heading. Right now, those patterns suggest the appetite for major transformation is smaller than the industry assumes.

"Google keeps building new features while users keep looking for ways around them. That tension will define what search becomes."

Roger Montti News Writer, Search Engine Journal

Leave the old keyword-based content tactics behind in the past where they belong. Look at what is at hand, what's in front of you right now, and optimize for that.

SEO pros have traditionally sought out easy answers to complex questions. So, I expect more of the same:

Correlation studies always get the clicks, so hustle-bro SEOs will continue to produce them.

Outrage at Google will always get the clicks, so expect social media SEOs to continue to stoke outrage while providing zero helpful advice.

A few SEO pros will "get it" and focus on the things that matter. Ignore the rage-baiting SEOs.

"Get on with the business of converting users, building relationships, and most importantly, creating and nurturing destinations and experiences that people are enthusiastic about."

Dan Taylor Partner & Head of Innovation(Organic & AI), SALT.agency

At its core, the internet has not changed shape. The way crawlers and websites operate remains much the same, so technical SEO will continue to be essential. What is shifting is how we measure SEO success.

For years, we have relied on a familiar set of metrics such as rankings, sessions, impressions, and conversions.

These traditional KPIs still have value, but they no longer capture the full complexity of how people discover, evaluate, and engage with brands in an era defined by AI and multi-modal search.

“The new approach to measurement focuses more on visibility, influence, and experience.”

We must now ask where and how our content appears within AI summaries, voice responses, image results, and ecosystems such as Gemini or Perplexity.

The future of SEO reporting will blend technical precision with brand perception, measuring how discoverable and trusted a business is across the expanding search landscape. Success will become less about achieving the top ranking and more about understanding how effectively we exist across these interconnected layers of discovery.

Many brands already do a good job of defining who they believe their core audience is. Yet audience identity is not static. It shifts with technology, needs, and culture. Some users remain deeply loyal, while others drift towards the edges as their interests or priorities change.

To create lasting value, we must look beyond demographics and into intent, context, and motivation. What is the user trying to solve, what pressures are they under, and how can we make their decision-making simpler or more rewarding?

Creating value for audiences means aligning brand expertise with genuine empathy and demonstrating usefulness through every piece of content, every message, and every experience.

Preventing these people from disengaging with your brand requires consistency, honesty, and relevance.

Brands must show up across the platforms their audiences use, not just in search results but in AI responses, visual discovery tools, and conversational interfaces.

They must remain recognizable and reliable wherever users encounter them. The future of SEO will be about building trust through presence and maintaining visibility across new modes of discovery, while proving the brand can offer something both human and helpful in an increasingly automated world.

“True audience loyalty will come from familiarity, confidence, and shared purpose with your brand.”

Fundamentals And Platform Diversification Over Hype

Katie Morton Editor-in-Chief, Search Engine Journal

Discovery is fragmented, and audiences are scattered across YouTube, ChatGPT, Reddit, and Instagram, to name just a few. Publishers are watching clicks plummet.

The pain is real, but opportunity follows every crisis in SEO.

The keyword-stuffed, algorithm-gaming content marketing model is finally going extinct. What remains is real marketing: understand your audience and solve their problems. Make something they'd miss if it disappeared.

What's Actually Working

Create content AI can't replicate. Serve niches rather than chasing scale. Be present where your audience seeks trusted information. Build brand equity by creating what users want, instead of chasing algorithms.

Publish quality content that earns the trust of your unique audience. Stick to fundamentals and show up consistently. This is the long game.

The Unpredictable Part

Google's command of search market share has dipped below 90%, indicating its stranglehold on the search market is finally slipping. More users are regularly turning to competitors for straightforward answers.

Expect more SERP experiments and algorithmic volatility. AI-curated discovery is underway, but the mission of every good SEO remains unchanged: help people find what they need and earn their trust.

Diversify across platforms, and make your audience fall in love with your content. You'll outlast whatever changes come next.



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