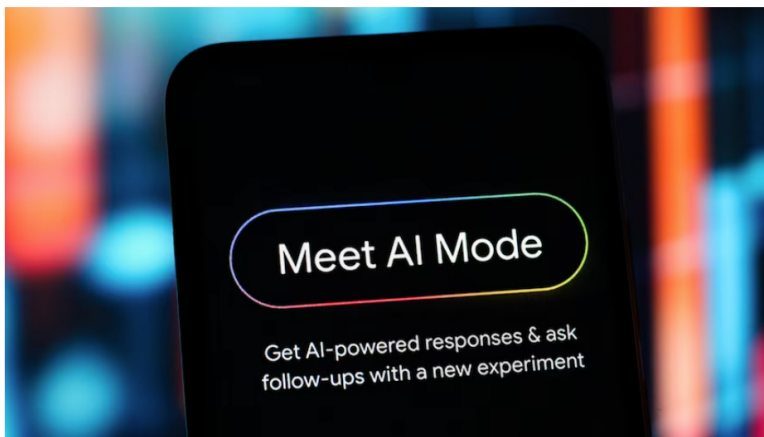


Businesses that rely on Google for customers see dramatic drop in traffic

By technology reporter James Purtil

ABC Science AI

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Google's deployment of its new AI Mode search tool in Australia last week is anticipated by webpage owners to accelerate a decline in search referrals. (Getty: Thomas Fuller/SOPA Images/LightRocket)

In short:

Google's new search technologies replace the standard links to websites with AI-generated answers.

Businesses that rely on content marketing to attract customers are seeing sharp falls in Google referral traffic.

What's next?

Some businesses are returning to pre-Google marketing methods, or hoping AI chatbot referrals will make up for the shortfall.

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Darren Woolley spent years sharing his expert knowledge of marketing on the web for free.

Almost overnight, users mostly stopped reading his words.

"It's essentially thousands and thousands of hours and years and years of work to generate this content," Mr Woolley, a former chair of the Australian Marketing Institute, said.

"Our website had over 3,500 pages of content. We were publishing three times a week."

"Then traffic dropped off around 80 per cent."



Australian marketing consultant Darren Woolley. (Supplied: Darren Woolley)

Mr Woolley's marketing consultancy is one of many Australian businesses affected by what may be the most significant change to the web in 20 years.

The open web — the decades-old global public resource of millions of websites without paywalls, accessible via a standard browser, from news sites to small-

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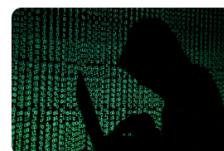
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business home pages — appears to be in decline.

For years, the popularity of social media and the rise of centralised in-app platforms have been eating into the open web's share of digital ad revenue.

Now, Google's pivot to the use of AI-generated answers in search means many websites are reporting significantly fewer visitors, since search users aren't clicking on source links to the same extent.

This is changing the underlying economics of web publishing.

Like many other businesses, Mr Woolley's consultancy published useful content in order to attract customers to its site via Google search (a technique known as "content marketing").

But since March this year, Google referral traffic to his website has "dropped off to a fraction of what it was".

Rubbing salt into the wound, he recognises his own words in the AI summaries (partly trained on his content) that are now choking traffic to his website.

His business now publishes less freely available content.

Multiplied across the internet, decisions like his could accelerate the open web's decline.

Is the open web in decline?

One measure of the open web's health is its share of online advertising compared to apps, streaming platforms, and all the other places on the internet ads can go.

In 2019, 40 per cent of display adverts purchased via Adwords (Google's advertising platform, now called Google Ads) were for the open web, according to a recent Google court filing.

By early 2025, that figure had plummeted to just 11 per cent, with apps and streaming platforms mostly making up the difference.

Based on this measure, the open web was struggling.

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Another metric is the amount of traffic websites are getting — and this is where the recent switch to AI in search appears to having an affect.

Through this year, Google rolled out AI-generated answers to search queries, so that by the second half of the year over a third of searches in Australia led to an AI summary.

Users who encounter a summary are [much less likely](#) to click on a traditional search result link.

Search traffic to Australian business websites abruptly fell in the second quarter of 2025, having steadily risen for the previous year, according to James Lawrence, co-founder of the Sydney digital advertising company the Rocket Agency.

"There were certain businesses largely unimpacted and certain businesses that were massively impacted," he said.

The [agency's analysis](#) found the vast majority of the summaries were for "informational" type searches ("how do I", "what is") rather than transaction ones ("buy shoes") or specific and targeted research.

"If you google how to fix a leaking tap, you'll see an AI overview. But if you search for best plumber in my suburb, you won't," Mr Lawrence said.

"Businesses' websites that previously generated large amounts of traffic through content marketing have found that the traffic has almost evaporated if an AI Overview exists.

"I think we're seeing the biggest change to digital since the popularisation of Google."

Elliot Dean, director of Temerity Digital, a Melbourne-based web strategy agency, witnessed Overviews having a similar impact on some clients' sites.



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"For pages appearing in search results with an AI Overview, click-throughs have dropped 15–70 per cent," he said.

Some publishers of news content also saw [sharp falls in traffic](#).

In a statement to the ABC, a Google spokesperson said its search feature evolved in response to "shifting user needs" and that its users were "more satisfied" with the results generated by the new AI tools than those delivered by conventional search.

"With previous changes, we've seen website owners adapt their approaches and in many instances, this has led to new opportunities where they have focused on unique, valuable content."

Will Google keep going with AI search?

The same pattern has been repeated in other countries with the rollout of AI search tools.

"It's pretty brutal," Kevin Indig, a US search engine optimisation (SEO) expert with clients around the world, said.

"We're seeing drops in traffic of 50 per cent."

The fortunes of People Inc, the largest digital and print publisher in the US, with titles like Food & Wine and Better Homes & Gardens, illustrates business' changing relationship with Google.

Several years ago, Google accounted for 90 per cent of traffic from the open web to People Inc websites. The tech company was integral to the publishers' success.

Now that figure is in the "high 20s", People Inc CEO Neil Vogel said at a tech conference in September.

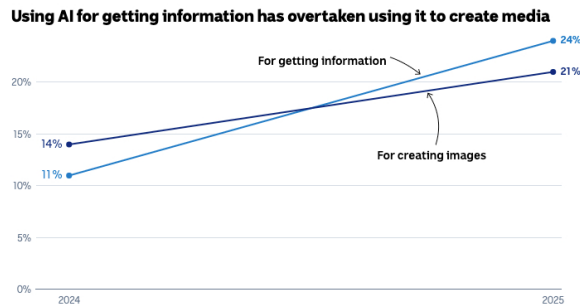
He now sees Google as a competitor, rather than a partner.

Google is unlikely to reverse its pivot to the use of AI in search.

Last week, it [deployed in Australia](#) a more advanced, chatbot-like form of AI search, AI Mode, which is likely to further reduce referral traffic to websites.

Information retrieval is emerging as one of the truly popular ways of engaging with a technology that's often met with distrust and scepticism.

Passive exposure to AI-generated information, mainly in search results, is now the main way the general public uses AI, supplanting other popular uses like image generation.



ABC Science / Source: [Niemen Lab](#) / [Get the data](#)

This is according to a [Niemen Lab survey](#) across six countries (Argentina, Denmark, France, Japan, the UK and the US), published in October, which also found many users trusted the AI-generated answers.

"A significant proportion of users" never click through to the source links, the survey found.

This is bad news for businesses that rely on Google for customers, but it's probably good news for Google.

It shows many users find AI search more convenient.

What can businesses do?

For some companies, hope lies in getting more referrals through AI chatbots.

These leads are seen as more likely to result in a sale, as the user has done more research to get to this point.

But it's not yet clear to what extent chatbot referrals will offset the fall in search traffic, or how much value to assign to an AI chatbot referring to a brand in its answer.

Searches on Google currently far outnumber the use of AI chatbots like ChatGPT.

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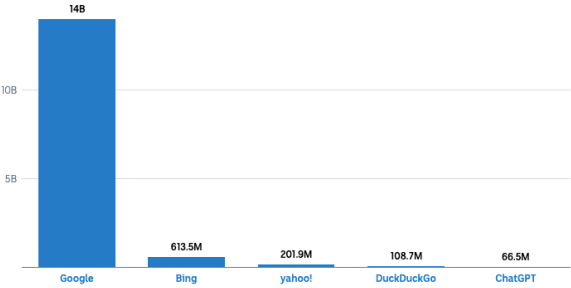


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The abrupt shift from standard search results to AI-generated answers has brought "chaos and confusion" to the billion-dollar SEO industry, US SEO expert Lily Ray said.

Some are rebadging SEO as "answer engine optimisation" or "large language model optimisation".

"This isn't the first major curveball in the SEO industry, although it may be the most significant yet," Ms Ray said.

For some companies, the decline of content marketing in Google search means a return to more traditional techniques of generating leads for sales.

Bean Ninjas, an Australian accounting firm for ecommerce businesses, saw a 25 per cent decline in organic search traffic in the year to August 2025.

"When people fill out our forms about where they found us, it seems less are coming through Google search," the firm's co-founder Meryl Johnston said.

"We've been leaning more into speaking at conferences and running in-person workshops and away from digital marketing."

Darren Woolley has also returned to pre-Google lead-generation methods, like calls and emails.

He said that was bad for buyers and sellers.

"The whole reason for the internet is to make it easier to find information. For buyers to find sellers like me," he said.

"I don't want someone emailing me to sell me something I don't want."

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