

Rewriting the Rules of Search: PR's Role in the AI Age

AI is changing search—here's what your PR strategy needs



Executive Summary

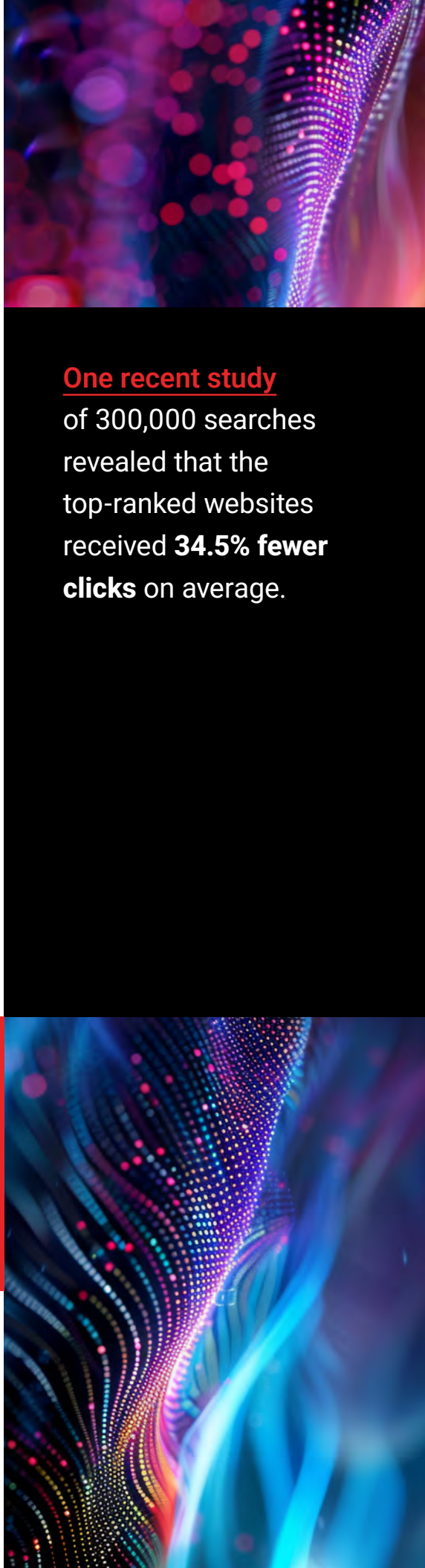
Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally changing how people discover and consume information online. This includes how they discover and experience your brand.

With large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Perplexity generating complete answers instead of links, traditional organic search engine traffic is in decline.

In 2025, the (W)right On Communications team has observed this trend impacting organic search traffic on our [PR agency site](#) as well as the client websites we monitor. While we see some referral traffic coming from LLMs, it is a lower volume. This is likely the case for your brand's website, too.

AI is disrupting digital business models and how brands connect online with prospects and stakeholders. Now's the time to embrace this shift and position your brand for success.

This white paper assesses the implications for brands and communicators and outlines how public relations strategies play a central role in elevating brand content visibility in the AI-dominated landscape.



One recent study of 300,000 searches revealed that the top-ranked websites received **34.5% fewer clicks** on average.

I. From Search to Synthesized Answers

The classic SEO game—ranking high on Google to earn traffic—is evolving fast. AI tools are now:

- **Summarizing** content from across the web.
Over 55% of Google searches produce AI Overviews
- **Reducing click-through rates** by answering questions directly. Even Hubspot's blog saw a 75% decline in traffic from Dec. 2023 to Jan. 2025.

Interesting trends are showing up in AI summaries that point to the importance of a public relations program. Authoritative news media outlets, thought leadership content and trade publications are among the top sources AI consults.



Users increasingly ask ChatGPT or Perplexity instead of Googling. These tools don't just index results; they compile and interpret them. AI tools can be prompted to cite their sources, but that's not a guarantee that the sources will be real. Trust but verify!

Studies show that AI is:

Prioritizing earned media sources in citations.

- 27% of AI searches cite news media sources.
 - 49% when the queries are for "recent" information.
 - Third-party corporate blogs and content are about 1/3 of citations.
- In one study, 3 publishers (BBC, The New York Times and CNN) were cited in 31% of 75,500 searches.
 - The top 10 (all major media outlets) got 80% of the citations.
 - Industry-specific queries also generated trade media citations.

Skiping websites and publishers unless prompted to cite sources.

- Publishers are starting to block AI crawlers from scraping their sites through Cloudflare's new tool that requires payment or permission.
- AI companies are responding by inking deals with major publishers in exchange for access to their platforms.



II. What This Means for Brands

LLMs may summarize your content without ever sending visitors to your site.

Websites are getting less traffic, especially those reliant on top search rankings or smaller, less influential sites.

Publishing-heavy businesses are vulnerable and fighting back so the situation is fluid and evolving.

Qualified traffic is improving (a silver lining!): Users who do click through from AI results are more likely to be engaged and in-market.

Public relations strategies are crucial to position brands across all industries to be visible and authoritative to LLMs.

Industries that depend on eyeballs (e.g., media, lifestyle blogs) are at greater risk. But most brands from travel to tech can benefit if they adjust quickly and update their digital strategies.

III. How PR Can Win in an AI-Driven Landscape

Strategic PR efforts are more vital than ever:

1. Authoritative Content

Create high-quality, credible content that AI models identify as reliable.

This includes:

- Well-researched blogs
- FAQs
- Expert explainers

AI depends on patterns and signals that indicate a source is reliable, trustworthy and knowledgeable within a specific field. Having your brand, spokespeople and SMEs authoring content on your site, in reputable online sources, endorsed by other experts (which can include awards or invitations to speak) and included on authoritative lists are vital tactics.

2. Thought Leadership

Position your subject matter experts (SMEs) as go-to voices in your industry through bylines, op-eds and expert quotes.

3. News Coverage

Earned media still powers credibility. AI systems prioritize reputable sources. Tier One media outlets like the BBC, Axios, The New York Times and FT.com are among the top cited. Niche publications are influential when search parameters are narrow.

4. Authenticity and Clarity

LLMs prefer clear, jargon-free, human-readable content. That makes effective PR writing more valuable. This includes structuring content to make it easy to quote like step-by-step guides, FAQs and conversational natural-language explainers.

5. Strategic Phrasing

Use the same tone, language and phrasing your audience might ask a chatbot. Consider questions like: “What are the benefits of battery storage?” or “How can PR improve brand visibility?”

IV. Data & Trends: What the Experts Say

The future is here now. AI-generated answers on Google and in AI tools are a few months away from being the norm for many business people and consumers:

OpenAI, Google and Anthropic report hundreds of millions of monthly users on their AI platforms.

Pew Research and McKinsey forecast AI will replace traditional web search for more than **40% of users under 40** by next year.

Generative AI achieved adoption by **39% of U.S. adults** within just two years compared to about five years for the Internet.

To get a sense of how people are using generative AI for search, the most common words triggering AI summaries, as tracked by Advanced Web Ranking's [Google AI Overview Tool](#) on July 18 were:

Word*	Percent
How	12.69%
SEO	9.62%
estate	7.38%
real	7.31%
insurance	5.74%
safety	4.42%
food	4.35%
Best*	3.41%
beverage	2.85%
best	2.74%

**Case sensitive*

Queries of three to four words account for slightly over half of all AI summaries, while two-, five- or six-word queries are about 40%. Conversely, one-, eight-, nine- and 10-word queries resulted in no AI summary in 98% of searches or more.

Some evidence also suggests that HTML content is preferred by LLMs over PDFs.

This may be because HTML content is more structured than a PDF—think “H1 headers” and other cues visible to a robot and embedded in the HTML on a typical web page.

V. Measuring Impact in a Post-Search World

You can use Google Analytics to track traffic coming to your website from AI sources. Here are tips to get you started.

Simple

- Go to **Acquisition > Traffic Source** and look for referrers like Perplexity.ai, chat.openai.com or Direct traffic with long time-on-site
- Tag PR content with UTMs for better tracking
- Monitor **engagement metrics** (time on page, conversions) over volume

Intermediate

1. Access Explorations

- Navigate to the “Explore” section in your GA4 property

2. Create a Blank Exploration

- Start with a blank template and give it a descriptive name like “AI Referral Traffic”.

3. Define Dimensions

- Add “Source/Medium” as a dimension to identify traffic sources like ChatGPT or Perplexity.
- Consider adding “Landing Page + query string” to track which specific pages AI referrals are landing on.

4. Define Metrics

- Add “Sessions” and “Active Users” as metrics to understand the volume of AI traffic.
- Include “Engagement Rate” to gauge user interaction.

5. Create a Filter

- Go to the “Filters” section.
- Select “Source/Medium” and choose “matches regex”.
- Enter a regex pattern to match URLs of AI platforms you want to track.
Example: `.*chatgpt\.com.*|.*perplexity.*|.*gemini\.google\.com.*|.*copilot\.microsoft\.com.*|.*openai\.com.*|.*claude\.ai.*|.*writesonic\.com.*|.*copy\.ai.*|.*deepseek\.com.*|.*huggingface\.co.*|.*bard\.google\.com*`

6. Customize the Report

- Adjust the layout of your exploration to best visualize the data.

7. Analyze the Results

- Once set up, the exploration will display data from AI referral sources, allowing you to analyze their behavior on your site.

VI. Strategic Recommendations

1. Get Coverage

Earn media mentions in trusted sources that AI tools scrape.

- These may include Wikipedia and other top journalistic, encyclopedic or corporate blog outlets or niche but authoritative sites in your brand's subject matter.
- Develop media relationships with high-authority publications and industry outlets.
- Be newsworthy and/or offer expert commentary for trending topics.
- Publish clear, well structured thought leadership articles on authoritative websites that link back to important content on your website.

2. Refresh Content

Rewrite content for clarity, completeness and conversational tone.

- Revisit your highest performing content and revise it to better serve LLMs.
- Answer "How?" questions in your content.
- Add summaries, bullet points and structured formatting to improve scannability.

3. Think Like a Bot

Mirror the structure and syntax of common AI prompts.

- Use AI to help you generate suitable 3- to 6-word phrases users might search to find your brand.
- Begin structuring content that speaks to these queries.
- Incorporate natural question-and-answer formatting into blogs and website copy.

Glossary of Terms

AI Crawl Budget: The idea that AI tools prioritize crawling certain types of content (well-structured, timely, authoritative) due to resource limitations.

Answer Box: A summary or answer generated directly in a search result, often sourced from multiple sites.

Authoritative Source: A trusted website or publication LLMs often reference when generating answers.

ChatGPT: An AI-powered chatbot developed by OpenAI that uses large language models to generate human-like text for answering questions, writing content and assisting with a wide range of tasks. See chatgpt.com

Citation Decay: The trend of content being summarized without user click-through to the original source.

Claude: A large language model developed by Anthropic that generates human-like text and answers, designed to be helpful, honest and safe in its responses. See claude.ai

Conversational Search: A search paradigm where users ask questions in natural language and expect direct, fluid responses—especially relevant for LLMs.

Earned Media: Publicity or exposure a brand receives through unpaid channels such as news coverage, influencer mentions, reviews or social shares, typically resulting from strong public relations efforts.

Engaged Session: In Google Analytics (G4A), refers to a user session that meets at least one of the following criteria: lasts longer than 10 seconds, includes at least one conversion event or involves two or more pageviews or screen views signifying that the user has actively engaged with your website rather than just briefly visiting and leaving.

Entity Optimization: Structuring your content to clearly associate your brand or topic with a recognizable "entity" that LLMs can identify (e.g., CEO, company, product name).

4. Claim Author Pages

Reinforce your SME's credibility with author bios, credentials and schema markup.

- Include bio pages with consistent naming, titles and links across platforms.
- Implement structured data (schema) to tag authorship and content expertise.
- Link author profiles to external content contributions and media mentions.

5. Blend SEO & PR

Treat every PR asset as potential AI training data.

- Place strategic inbound links from your earned media coverage to your owned brand assets.
- Show your authority and expertise by placing thought leadership content on leading trade media or trade association websites.
- Optimize press releases and bylines with target keywords and structured data.
- Publish similar messages across multiple platforms: video scripts, podcast interviews, blogs, quotes in news articles, white papers and social media posts.

Glossary of Terms (cont'd)

GEO: See Google's AI Overviews.

Google's AI Overviews: A generative AI feature in Google Search that provides summarized, conversational-style answers to user queries directly on the search results page.

Gemini: A family of advanced large language models developed by Google DeepMind that powers conversational AI experiences across products like Search, Workspace and the Gemini chatbot. See gemini.google.com

Hallucination: An incorrect or made-up response generated by an LLM.

LLM (Large Language Model): AI trained on large datasets to understand and generate natural language (e.g., GPT-4, Claude, Gemini).

Perplexity.ai: An AI-powered search engine that cites sources in real-time. See perplexity.ai

Prompt: A user query submitted to an AI model (e.g., "What are good PR tactics for AI visibility?").

Prompt Engineering: The practice of crafting questions or inputs designed to produce the best possible response from an AI model.

Schema Markup: Code added to websites to help AI understand the context of your content.

Structured Content: Refers to information organized using consistent formatting, metadata and markup (like headers, lists, and schema) that makes it easier for LLMs to understand, extract, and reference accurately.

Zero-Click Search: A search result experience where the user gets an answer without clicking any link—often from featured snippets or AI summaries.



VII. Final Word: Smarter PR for Smarter Discovery

While AI is disrupting traditional search, it's also revealing the value of strategic content and communications. The brands showing up in AI-generated responses will be those that build credibility, clarity and consistency through smart PR.

How to See AI-Driven Traffic in Google Analytics

- Perplexity.ai and ChatGPT are emerging referrers
- Look for spikes in "Direct" traffic or long average session durations
- Use UTM parameters on earned placements to track AI-sourced traffic
- Monitor conversions from new or unfamiliar domains

About (W)right On Communications

(W)right On Communications is a savvy, imaginative and trusted strategic communications agency specializing in public relations, content strategy and cross-platform storytelling. With deep expertise in earned, owned, social and paid media, we help purpose-driven organizations stand out, build trust and create impact.



**Need help adapting your brand
to the new AI search era?**

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