

# The SEO Insight to Leave Behind.

Here's Why Your Keyword Trends Data May Be Misleading.

Until a couple of years ago, up to 93% of buyer journeys began on search engines, 95% of which began on Google. Some industries were able to almost equate market demand trends with keyword search trends and extrapolate more than mere keyword opportunities from their SEO tools.

AI assistants threw a curve ball into what was a monolith environment, leaving marketers unsure of how to read their data and how to act on it.

What do keywords tell us today? Can queries bridge the gaps AI search created?

Join us as we explore the peripheral impacts of AI search, including keyword-based observations to retire and how to use a more integrated approach to understanding your audience's needs.

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## If You Follow Keyword Search Volume Trends, This One's For You

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During a routine monthly reporting session with a client, we pulled up Google Trends data for their primary target keyword, something we do at the start of every reporting cycle to establish market context before zooming into their own numbers. The client's performance metrics were shiny green across the board, as usual, with impressions up, clicks up, organic traffic growing, and conversions tracking well.

And yet, their main keyword's search demand had been declining, month after month. Because we were comparing year-over-year figures, seasonality was off the table as an explanation, so the category itself appeared to be shrinking.

For our client, that was an unsettling signal. If the market was contracting, what did that mean for the longevity of their results?

**The answer, as it turned out, had nothing to do with demand contraction and everything to do with demand migration, a shift in search behavior, to be exact.**

Inundated with news about SEO, AIO, GEO, and the whole family of acronyms, many marketers haven't had a chance to stop and reflect on the legacy thinking that might be affecting how they approach their everchanging dashboards.

That is what we will do here. We'll reflect on the relationship between SEO metrics and market trends, where GEO data fits into this picture, and how to bridge the two search channels to better understand and serve your audience. We'll reference the latest research, along with our agency experience managing SEO and GEO strategies for brands across industries.

# Keyword Volumes No Longer Represent the Totality of Search Opportunity

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To understand why keyword data has become harder to read, it helps to remember what made it reliable in the first place.

For most of the internet era, search behavior was remarkably consistent. Users went to a search engine (almost always Google, which commanded around 95% of the global search market) and typed short, direct queries such as:

**“nail salon near me”**

**“cheap hotel manhattan”**

**“accounting software for small business”**

Tools like Keyword Planner tracked these word strings and SEO teams optimized for them.

Because for years now, anywhere between 43% to 93% of buyer journeys begin on a search engine (the range varies by industry and study), these head terms functioned as a reasonable proxy for market demand. If people want something, they type it into Google, and we can see how many of them are typing it.

That model worked because the behavior was stable and the platform was singular.

Then, in November 2022, OpenAI released ChatGPT to the public. This was the first publicly accessible AI assistant of its kind. It gained a million users in five days. Within months, it had 100 million.

Within a year, the market had proliferated with alternatives, most notably Anthropic’s Claude, Google’s Gemini, Microsoft’s Bing AI, and users adopted them as platforms for discovery and research, among many other functions. By May 2025, Google had launched AI Mode, folding generative AI directly into its own search experience.

**112.6M**

U.S. users of AI-powered tools in 2024, nearly a third of the population

**78%**

of global AI model traffic controlled by ChatGPT and Gemini as of mid-2024

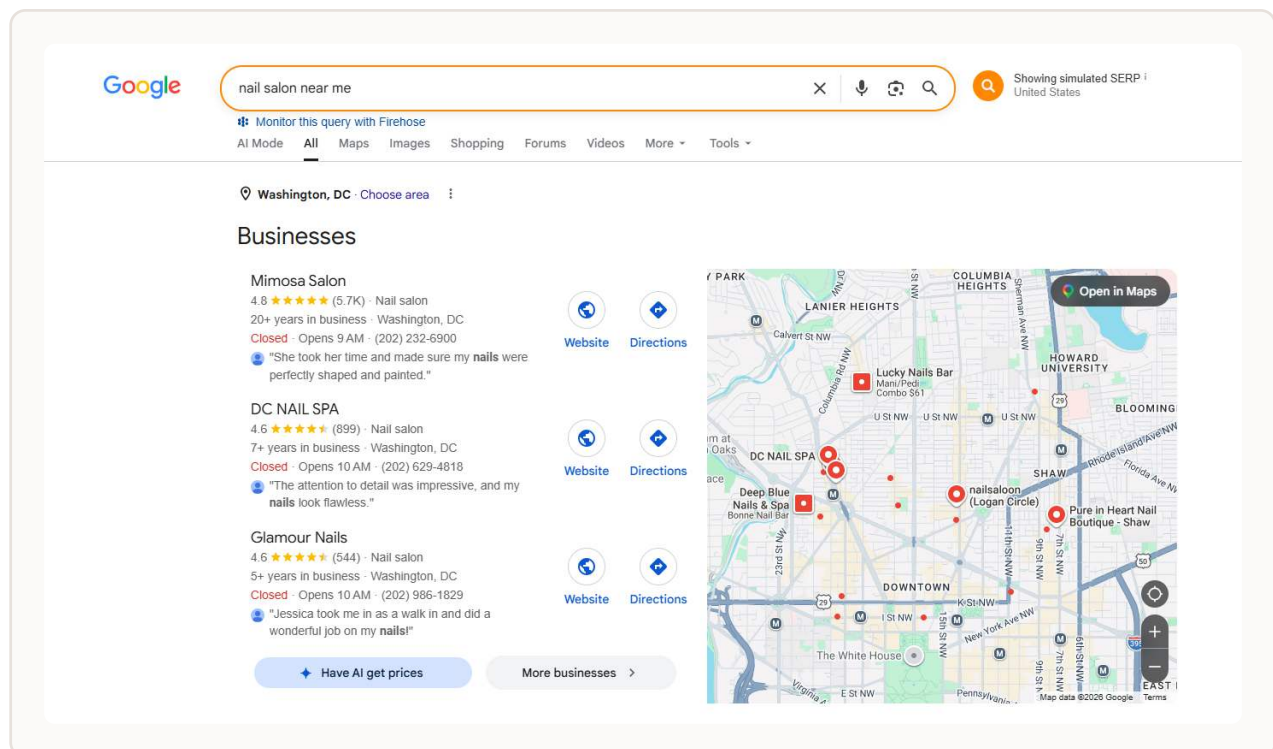
**90M+**

people projected to use generative AI as their primary search tool by 2027

This does not mean “traditional,” or “blue links,” search is gone. Most users move between both, using Google for some queries and AI tools for others. But the pool of searches that flow through traditional keyword-based engines is no longer the whole pool. And the queries that do flow through AI tools look structurally different from the ones keyword trackers are built to measure.

Take “nail salon near me.”

On Google, that query is largely a map pack lookup for someone who is looking for a list of nearby locations with ratings.

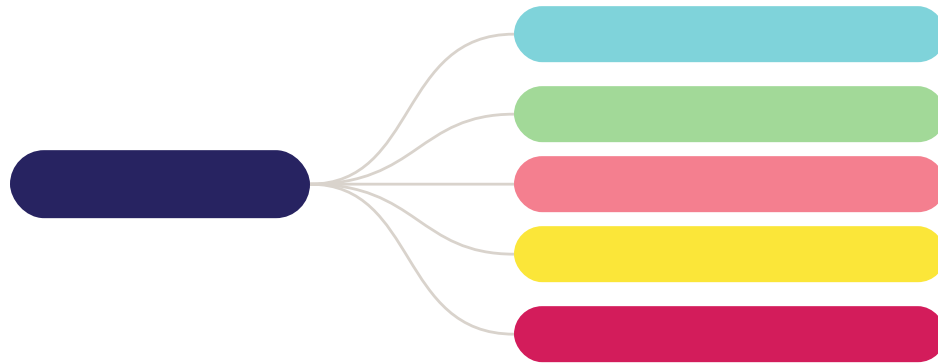


Google Search, “nail salon near me,” July 2026

On AI search, the same underlying need expands into a completely different query shape. You are much more likely to use an AI assistant for queries like “are there any nail salons that do

rubber base nails, have good reviews especially for hygiene, and are up to 15 min away from me?"

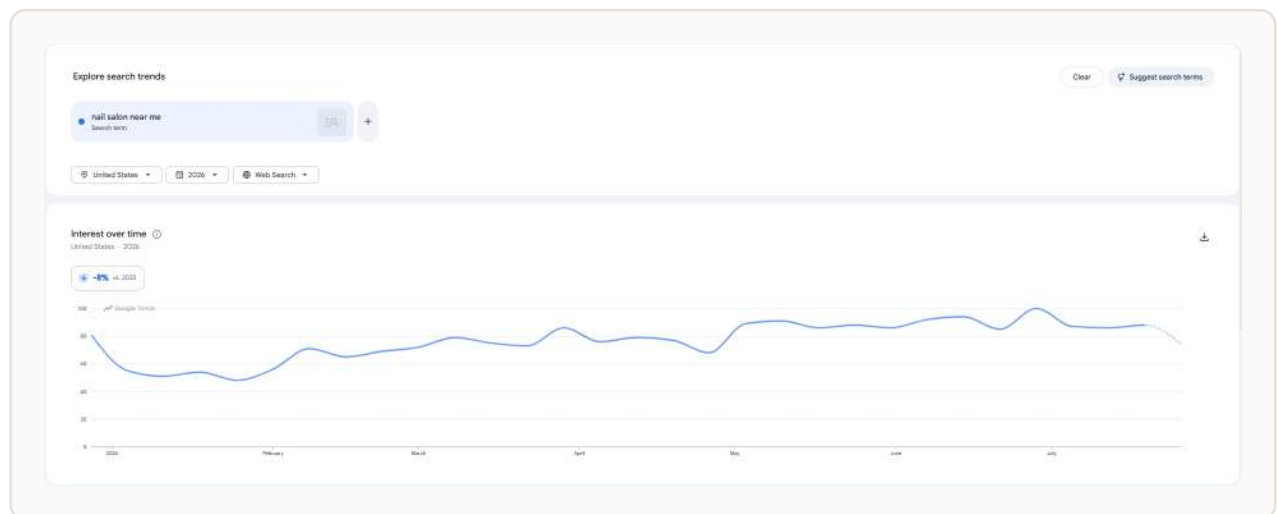
An AI system processing that intent fans out into sub-queries covering local availability, specific treatments (gel nails, rubber base), hygiene and safety, pricing, and location.



*How one query fans out into simultaneous sub-intents on AI platforms*

So, when we open our Google Trends to look up a standard keyword like “nail salon near me” and we see an 8% YoY decline, we would then open up the hood of the entire keyword category to see if search demand has shifted elsewhere. But now we also have to ask ourselves: what is the impact of AI search?

Estimated AI search volume for the same query, tracked via tools attempting to measure AI platform behavior, might be adding tens of thousands of additional monthly interactions that the tools like Google Trends and Ahrefs do not capture at all.



The keyword tracker is measuring what it always measured, which is the search volume on a specific string. The problem is that this measurement now represents a shrinking share of total search behavior, without any indication on the dashboard that the share has shrunk.

## **Clicks and impressions: website visibility metrics that also wobbled**

Parallel to the growing AI search adoption, Google's search environment was evolving as well, further impacting our data, especially when it comes to gauging brand visibility and audience interest.

First came the AI Overviews in May 2024 (US launch). This led to the zero click trend which meant that websites were getting less organic traffic. Bain & Company's research found that roughly 60% of searches now end without the user clicking through to any website. Similarweb data, cited in Search Engine Journal, reported zero-click searches for news-related queries rising from 56% to 69% between May 2024 and May 2025.

Despite the decline in traffic, SEOs noticed little to no impact on their organic conversions. This meant that the traffic lost to zero-click was mainly top of the funnel and didn't materially impact website performance. So, parting with clicks as an SEO metric (at least for a while) wasn't as difficult as it first appeared to be.

This is why we transitioned to impressions as a more stable metric and an indicator of visibility in search.

### **Then impressions stopped being reliable too.**

In April 2026, Google disclosed a logging error that had inflated impressions, CTR, and average position in Search Console from May 13, 2025 through April 27, 2026. It also overlapped two other changes: the September 2025 removal of the num=100 parameter, which inflated impressions for unseen positions, and June's folding of AI Mode data into Performance totals. Clicks held steady; any comparison across that window mixes three overlapping systems.

To summarize what SEOs dashboards went through in roughly three years:

- Keyword search volume became a partial picture as search migrated to AI platforms.
- Clicks declined as zero-click behavior accelerated.

- Impressions, the metric many teams leaned on to compensate, turned out to have been inaccurate for nearly a year.

Each fallback metric failed in a different way, for a different reason, on a different timeline. It's been a rollercoaster for us SEOs – exciting, but not always fun.

## The Elusive AI Search Query: Why It's Hard to Track AI Search

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The natural response to a measurement gap is to find a tool that fills it. As AI search grew, GEO tracking tools appeared on the market promising visibility into AI search behavior, estimated query volumes across ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and Google's AI Overviews, a way to see the searches that keyword trackers miss.

For SEOs who had spent years working with clear keyword sets and predictable monthly volumes, the appeal was obvious. We know how to work with a number. We know how to build a strategy around tracked terms. Hence the inclination to find the AI equivalent of a keyword list.

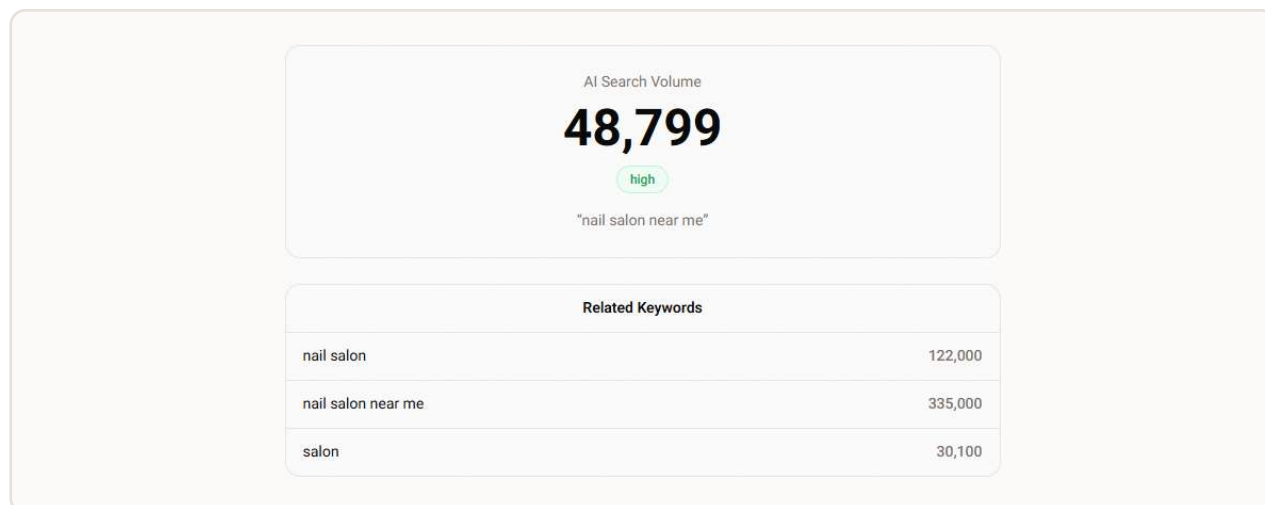
The problem is that AI search does not work like keyword search.

When a user types "nail salon near me" into Google, that string is the query. It is trackable and consistent. When a user asks an AI assistant the same thing in conversation, the system fans out into multiple sub-queries behind the scenes, pulling from local availability, service specifics, pricing, safety considerations, and trend data simultaneously.

So the "query" becomes a cluster of intents processed simultaneously, and the surface expression varies every time a different user phrases the same underlying need differently.

GEO tracking tools do their best to model this behavior, and their directional insights are useful, but they are trying to estimate search behavior that is much harder to track than traditional Google searches.

The Topify.ai platform, for example, estimates nearly 49,000 monthly AI searches for "nail salon near me," an indicator that demand exists on AI platforms. What it cannot tell you is the precise query distribution, the conversion behavior, or how that volume compares to traditional search in any mathematically reconcilable way.



*Topify, "nail salon near me," July 2026*

This leads to the second problem: even if AI search volume estimates were precise, combining them with traditional keyword volume would not give you a clean picture of total demand. Most users move between both platforms depending on the task, which means overlap is real and unquantifiable.

The third problem is methodological incompatibility. Anyone who has run Ahrefs and Semrush in parallel for the same keyword knows how significantly their estimates can diverge, sometimes by a factor of two or three for the same term, because each platform uses different data sources, different modeling approaches, and different definitions of what counts as a search.

Combining a traditional keyword estimate from one platform with an AI search estimate from a different platform compounds that incompatibility.

GEO tracking tools' directional insights are real and valuable. But they are not a solution to the measurement problem the industry is facing. They are a new, partially lit window into a behavior that resists precise measurement by its nature.

## Accept the Change. Change the Perspective.

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For those of us who have spent ten or more years in this industry, the volatility of the past few years has been disorienting (we can be honest; this is a safe space).

We built programs on stable signals and reported against fairly consistent metrics. We optimized for trackable terms and watched the numbers move in predictable ways. The sequence of disruptions, starting with AI search migration to zero-click acceleration and the GSC data integrity failure, landed in close succession and gave us dashboards that are harder to read than they have ever been.

It is important to sit with that frustration for a moment, because the temptation to reach for a replacement signal that restores the old certainty is real. The GEO tracking tool that promises AI query visibility, the impression metric that substitutes for clicks, the broader keyword universe that makes declining head terms look less alarming, each of these has a role, but none of them fully restores what was lost.

What we can do is change what we are trying to read.

At Digital Spice, the shift in search behavior has actually reinforced our long-time position that the industry's obsession with keyword-to-page matching was always a proxy for something more important, which is understanding what your audience needs and whether you are meeting that need. AI search is forcing that shift in a way that no amount of industry advocacy could.

Here is what a more honest demand-reading practice looks like, given everything we have laid out.

**1**

### **Read keyword trends as directional signals**

Head-term keyword volume is still telling you what is happening on blue links search for a specific tracked query. The error is treating that as a complete picture of category demand. When a tracked term declines, the first question should be “has this intent migrated? And where?”

Check the keyword category to see which related terms might have increased. Check AI search trends to see whether users are increasingly using these platforms for discovery. This is why we always say that SEO cannot be separated from GEO: expand your dashboard and track search behaviors cross-platform.

**2**

### **Follow conversions**

Direct SEO metrics like clicks and impressions have wobbled in the past years, but conversions have been unscathed, at least for our clients and some industry reports as well. The visitors arriving on site have been converting in similar numbers as before, or in some cases, even better.

AI search is doing top-of-funnel filtering on your behalf. The visitor who arrives has already done a layer of research and is closer to a decision. Adobe Digital Insights observed the same pattern across retail and travel in their Q1 2026 traffic report, noting that AI-referred visitors convert at notably higher rates than non-AI traffic. If sessions are down but conversions are holding, the program is likely working.

**3**

### **Use GSC to read query-type patterns**

Post-April 27, 2026, clicks in Google Search Console are your most reliable first-party signal. Segment by query type (question-based versus short-tail versus informational) and watch where click and impression patterns are growing versus shrinking.

In our client work, impression growth has consistently concentrated in question-based and long-tail segments. Do not compare pre- and post-April 27 impression data without annotating the GSC bug window; the numbers are measuring different things.

**4****Build content for the full query shape**

The fanout architecture that AI uses to process a category like “nail salon” reveals what your content program should cover. If your content only covers the head terms, you are present for the portion of the journey that flows through traditional search.

The deeper, more specific questions that AI surfaces require dedicated, well-structured content: pages, optimized passages, or FAQs that answer the safety question, the comparison question, the “is this treatment right for me” question. Sites with thin coverage are less likely to be referenced in AI-generated responses than those with structured, complete answers.

**5****Treat brand as infrastructure**

One counterintuitive finding that has held across our programs is that branded search is proving more resilient than generic category search in this environment. Users who already know your brand are more likely to seek you out directly or click through when your brand appears in an AI-generated response.

This means brand investment has a measurable organic search return, one that does not show up neatly in keyword volume reports but does show up in conversion behavior and in the share of AI citations that name you by name.

## CONCLUSION

# It's Time to Redefine Our Relationship with Keyword Data

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The measurement environment for organic search has changed more in the past three years than in the previous decade. Keyword search volumes capture a shrinking share of total search behavior. Clicks have been deflated by zero-click behavior. Impressions were unreliable for nearly a year. And the tools designed to fill the AI search gap provide directional estimates from incompatible methodologies that cannot be cleanly combined with traditional data.

The response to this is developing a different relationship with the data. We, marketers and SEOs, should use each signal for what it can still tell us, acknowledge what it cannot, and look to business outcomes like conversions and revenue as the most reliable indicator of whether your content program is working.

The underlying demand in most categories has not disappeared. In many cases, it has grown. It has migrated to new platforms, taken new shapes, and become harder to see from the tools most teams are still using.

This shift requires us to expand our focus from keyword search trends to the ever-changing, ever-expanding search environment. It also requires us to accept that we may never have a clear picture of this ungraspable environment. That uncertainty challenges us to abandon the comfort of stable search volumes and predictable trends, and to laser-focus on understanding and serving our audience's unique needs as best we can.

**The brands that succeed are those that can understand their audience better than anyone and deliver value competitors do not.**



## About Digital Spice

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Digital Spice is a digital marketing agency specializing in franchise and multi-location brand visibility, with deep expertise across sectors. Our work spans SEO strategy, content programs, UX consulting, and web design, always grounded in what the data can tell us, and transparent about what it cannot.

If your team is navigating a dashboard that is harder to read than it used to be, we are happy to help you find the signal in the noise.



**Let's find the signal in your noise.**

Get a free proposal and see how your SEO and GEO data fit together.

[thedigitalspice.com/contact](https://thedigitalspice.com/contact)

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