



## **SALES AND MARKETING ROUNDTABLE #267**

### **How AI is Transforming SEO and Pay-Per-Click Advertising with Zack Collevecchio**

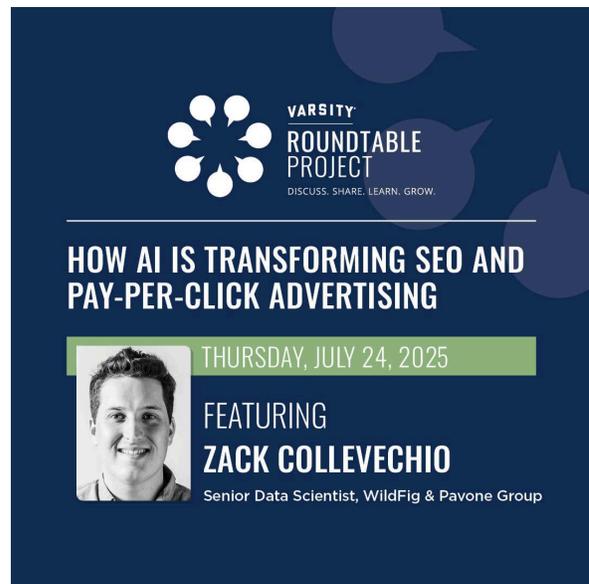
Thank you to everyone who attended our latest Sales and Marketing Roundtable!  
NOTE: To provide anonymity during the Roundtable discussion, participants and their communities will not be identified.

#### **ABOUT OUR GUEST**

This week on Varsity's Roundtable, we were joined by Zack Collevecchio, a Senior Data Scientist at WildFig and Pavone Group, who brings a wealth of expertise in data analytics and digital marketing.

Zack discussed the rapidly evolving role of artificial intelligence in the digital marketing sphere, providing insights into how AI is transforming strategies and operations.

He also discussed AI's significant impact on the landscape of SEO and Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising, illustrating the shift towards more intent-based, conversational approaches in search engine optimization and the adaptation of PPC tactics to remain effective amidst these technological advancements.



## FRESH PERSPECTIVES

- **AI TRANSFORMS SEO STRATEGY** – With AI advancing beyond keywords, SEO now focuses on understanding user intent and delivering conversational results. As AI becomes integral, adopting strategies that align with AI's interpretative capabilities is crucial.
- **ZERO-CLICK SEARCHES REDEFINE TRAFFIC METRICS** – AI-driven zero-click searches are rising, where users find answers directly in search results without site visits. This shift mandates new ways to measure engagement and brand visibility as traditional click-through metrics decline.
- **PPC'S STEADFAST ROLE IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE** – Despite AI's impact on SEO, PPC remains less affected as it targets decision-ready consumers. Integrating PPC with AI solutions like Performance Max campaigns ensures continued relevance and effectiveness.
- **OPTIMIZING DOMAIN AUTHORITY BEYOND SPENDING** – While PPC spend might influence domain authority slightly, the real impact comes from established web presence, traffic, and high-quality backlinks. Building credibility with authoritative sources boosts trust with search engines.
- **EXPANDING SEARCH HORIZONS WITH AI PLATFORMS** – As AI platforms gain traction as search engines, maintaining updated UTM tracking and leveraging industry tools to monitor AI-driven traffic becomes vital. Staying on top of these shifts ensures maximum visibility.
- **CONVERSATIONAL AND STRUCTURED CONTENT IS KEY** – In the era of AI, crafting content that is both conversational and structured enhances accessibility and relevance. Ensuring AI can effectively interpret and present your content is essential for maintaining a strong web presence.

## LINKS & CONTACT INFO

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## COMING UP ON VARSITY'S ROUNDTABLE!

Please join our next Roundtable gathering on Thursday, July 31 at 12 p.m. ET, 11 a.m. CT and 9 a.m. PT. We'll be joined by Sonya Cooper from Quench. She will be sharing insights from Quench's 2025 Food Trends report.

## NEW ON VARSITY'S PODCAST, ROUNDTABLE TALK

The most recent episode of Varsity's podcast, Roundtable Talk, features a conversation with Barbara Sullivan, National Director of the Village to Village Network. With a background in long-term care and nonprofit leadership, Barbara has been a key force behind the village movement, which helps older adults age in place with community support.

Podcast host Derek Dunham and Barbara discuss how villages serve the "missing middle," the vital role of volunteers, and creative partnerships with senior living, healthcare, and faith-based groups. Barbara also shares how villages combat social isolation and her vision to expand the movement nationwide. Check it out on the [Roundtable Talk page](#) of the Varsity website!



### A FEW QUICK NOTES

- **Like everything related to AI, all of this is subject to change (very quickly).**
  - Due to a new breakthrough, business model, or a variety of other factors, the rules that apply today may not apply tomorrow.
- **We don't know what the end looks like yet.**
  - Something new happens seemingly every week. Google themselves probably don't know the exact future of SEO & PPC.

Just a couple of quick notes before we dive into the details. Everything we discuss today is subject to change at any moment. We're talking about a field that's still developing, so even the top experts are figuring things out as we go. Basically, what we've got right now is a snapshot of what we think is true.

Another thing is, we don't really know how this whole thing ends. Even Google might be a bit in the dark about what the future holds for SEO and PPC. With AI shaking things up and competing for clicks, the business model we'll end up with is still anyone's guess.

### **SEO: Search Engine Optimization**

#### **What is it?**

- The field of improving a website to increase its visibility on search engines.

#### **How does it differ from ads?**

- SEO aims to drive traffic to a website organically (for free!)

#### **How does it work?**

- There are many layers to it, but it involves both on-page techniques (like keyword optimization) and off-page techniques (such as backlinks).

#### **Why is it important?**

- Users can find your website more easily if the search engine believes your site's content aligns with the user's search.

Let's cover the basics of SEO and PPC. SEO, or search engine optimization, is all about making your website visible to search engines without paying for ads. It's like charming Google so it thinks your site is the best match for search terms, driving free, organic traffic.

SEO involves on-page tactics like keyword optimization and off-page efforts like building backlinks, which boost your site's trustworthiness. For instance, if a reputable site like The New York Times links to you, Google trusts you more. The benefit is that it connects you to your audience for free with the right content.

### **PPC: Pay-Per-Click (or Paid Search ads)**

#### **What is it?**

- An advertising model where advertisers pay each time someone clicks on their ad.

#### **How does it work?**

- You bid on keywords and your ad appears in search engine results. If someone clicks on the ad, you pay.

#### **Why is it important?**

- It delivers immediate traffic and is highly targeted. You see immediate results, but it can get costly if not properly optimized.

On the flip side, we've got PPC, or pay-per-click, which covers paid search ads. This is where you pay Google—since they're the biggest player—to show your ads online. When someone clicks on your ad, you pay Google for that traffic.

So here's how it works: You bid on keywords, like "senior living in Philadelphia." If someone searches those keywords, Google links them to your ad. PPC is perfect for getting immediate results, unlike the gradual buildup with SEO. It's great for targeting specific audiences, but if not optimized, costs can soar. Plus, once you stop paying, your traffic might drop significantly.

### AI Search

- **Moving beyond keywords** - shifting from keyword focused to conversational content.
- **Engagement over clicks** - AI gives users answers directly, bypassing your website. It's important to track engagement and visibility over clicks and traffic.
  - Google's incentives and your incentives are no longer the same.
- **Personalized results** - Results for an identical query may differ from user to user, based on what Google knows about you.
- **Localized content** - AI search bots return location-based recommendations.
- **Structured data** - Websites must have proper formatting to help AI search bots understand your content.

AI search is shaking things up by moving SEO beyond just keywords. Traditionally, SEO focused heavily on matching exact keywords, but AI changes that by understanding intent and offering more conversational, interpretative results. Even if there's no exact keyword match, AI can connect the right content to user queries.

AI's influence in SEO also shifts focus from clicks to engagement. It can summarize website content, giving users info without needing to visit sites, which misaligns Google's and site owners' incentives. Google benefits from keeping users on their platform, but how they'll compensate sites for content use is still uncertain.

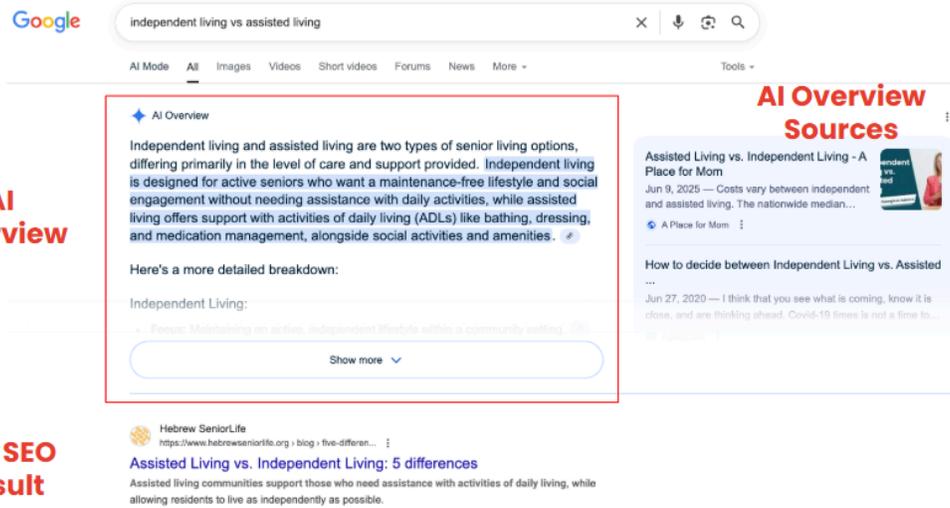
Another game-changer is personalized results. Google's massive data trove lets them customize search results based on individual preferences, like what "best" means for a user. AI also continues to offer localized content, tailoring results to a user's location.

Lastly, structured data is crucial. Just like people prefer well-organized content, AI needs properly structured data to crawl and understand it effectively. Formatting your website's data for AI is vital in this new search landscape.

## By now, you've seen the AI Overviews in search results

AI Overview

Top SEO Result



The screenshot shows a Google search interface with the query "independent living vs assisted living". The AI Overview is highlighted with a red box and contains the following text:

**AI Overview**

Independent living and assisted living are two types of senior living options, differing primarily in the level of care and support provided. Independent living is designed for active seniors who want a maintenance-free lifestyle and social engagement without needing assistance with daily activities, while assisted living offers support with activities of daily living (ADLs) like bathing, dressing, and medication management, alongside social activities and amenities.

Here's a more detailed breakdown:

Independent Living:

- Focus: Maintaining an active, independent lifestyle within a community setting.

Show more

**AI Overview Sources**

- Assisted Living vs. Independent Living - A Place for Mom  
Jun 9, 2025 — Costs vary between independent and assisted living. The nationwide median...
- A Place for Mom
- How to decide between Independent Living vs. Assisted ...  
Jun 27, 2020 — I think that you see what is coming, know it is close, and are thinking ahead. Covid-19 times is not a time to...

**Top SEO Result**

Hebrew SeniorLife  
<https://www.hebrewseniorlife.org/blog/five-differen...>

**Assisted Living vs. Independent Living: 5 differences**

Assisted living communities support those who need assistance with activities of daily living, while allowing residents to live as independently as possible.

You've probably noticed AI overviews popping up in search results by now. I have a screenshot example showing a typical Google page with a search for "IL versus AL." The AI overview is right at the top, highlighted in red, giving a quick summary before any of the usual search results. Interestingly, this AI overview appears above the top SEO result.

Before AI, that top spot would've gone to a site like Hebrew Senior Life, which users would click on for info. But now, the AI overview provides the answer right away and includes a list of sources on the side for transparency. For example, "A Place for Mom" is cited, though users don't actually visit their site for the info.

This shift creates zero click searches, where engagement happens without site visits, challenging how impact is measured. It's also skipping over top SEO results and using content from sites without directly benefiting them, shaking up the traditional order in search ranking.

### AI Overviews: Effects on SEO

- Automatically appear when a search is queried
- Are typically placed at the top of search results; ahead of SEO results.
- **Pull from sources deemed credible; place a greater emphasis on authority and clarity.**
  - Domain authority is more important than ever.
- Lead to decreasing click rates and zero-click searches.
  - Since users are getting the information they need on the results page, they no longer need to click through to a website to get an answer.
    - Reductions in organic traffic.

AI overviews often appear at the top of search results if the model thinks it has a good upfront answer, and they're getting more common as they improve. These overviews typically pull from sources deemed most credible, like "A Place for Mom," even if it's not the top SEO result, because of their high domain authority.

To optimize for AI overviews, boosting your domain authority is key. This involves strategies similar to SEO, like increasing content, backlinks, and traffic, to gain Google's trust.

A side effect of AI overviews is the rise of zero-click searches, where users find the answer they need without clicking through to a site. As this trend grows, click-through rates and organic traffic are expected to decrease, something many might already be noticing.

### AI Overviews: Effects on PPC

- PPC is less affected than SEO due to it being lower-funnel.
- Fewer clicks means less money generated for Google by search ads.
- Part of Google's solution? Optimizing campaigns (using AI, of course):
  - Performance Max campaigns - delivers ads across all of Google's channels (search, YouTube, display, etc.)
  - Demand Gen campaigns - multi-format, visually-appealing ads that get shown across Youtube, Discover, and Gmail.
- Speculation: There's not been much talk of this yet, but I expect at some point you will be able to pay to have the AI search bot recommend your products.

PPC, or paid ads, are generally less impacted by AI compared to SEO because they target lower-funnel users—those ready to make a decision—rather than those just gathering info. For example, someone searching "IL versus AL" is still in the early stages, whereas searches for things like "IL near me with openings today" are closer to conversion and more PPC-driven.

One tricky aspect is fewer clicks might mean less ad revenue for Google since PPC charges per click. To adapt, Google's enhancing their campaigns with AI, especially through Performance Max (Pmax) campaigns. These use algorithms to place ads across Google's channels, like search, YouTube, and display ads, in the most effective spots.

For addressing top-funnel needs, Google is using more visually appealing Demand Gen campaigns on platforms like YouTube and Gmail. Essentially, it's an AI solution to an AI problem. Looking ahead, there could even be an option to pay for AI search to recommend products, similar to PPC but tailored for AI.

### AI Search Agents Outside of Google

- Users will also use AI to discover your content outside of Google Search.
- Platforms such as ChatGPT and Perplexity are rising popularity as search solutions.
- UTM tracking - best way to track, but can be hit or miss.
- Can use third-party tools to track visibility in platforms.
- Same principles apply to rank in these platforms. Easy tips:
  - Stay on top of your web presence
  - Ensure content is up to date and accurate. Encourage happy customers to leave reviews and make sure you respond to every one (even the not-so-good ones).
    - Automated tools can help here as well.

With AI platforms like ChatGPT, Claude, and Copilot becoming popular, people are starting to use them as search engines, not just Google. To adapt, it's crucial to keep UTM tracking updated, so if someone finds your site through an AI platform, you know it. Many industries are seeing increased referral traffic from these AI sources.

Tools similar to Google's search console are available to track how often you're mentioned on AI platforms. SEO principles still largely apply here, with a few tweaks. Ensure your web content is up-to-date, accurate, and concise, as AI prefers straightforward info. Also, maintaining positive reviews is key for building trust with AI; encourage customers to leave reviews and respond to all feedback.

If managing reviews isn't your thing, there are AI tools to help monitor, craft, and post responses automatically, saving you time while keeping your presence active.

## TAKEAWAYS



1. **This field is nascent and evolving rapidly.** Be sure to stay up to date on latest trends, tools, and best practices.
2. AI search agents are going to lead to **reduced traffic** to your website.
  - a. New KPIs are necessary to track performance
3. **Zero-click searches will rise.** Users are able to get the information from your page without ever clicking. Need to track brand visibility as a response.
4. Ensure your website is **structurally sound** and easy to read for AI agents. Schema, headers, formatting; the format of your content is almost as important as the content itself.
5. **Conversational content over keywords.** Since AI agents can 'understand' content in a deeper way, ranking for keywords will be less important.

Zack offered five key takeaways:

1. **CONSTANT EVOLUTION:** The information shared is current but likely to change in six months. Stay updated on new developments and trends.
2. **REDUCED TRAFFIC:** It's not a question of if, but when we'll see traffic drops due to AI providing answers without clicks, affecting both SEO and paid traffic. Expect a need for new KPIs to gauge performance effectively.
3. **RISING ZERO-CLICK SEARCHES:** As users increasingly get info without site visits, it's crucial to find ways to measure value, like tracking brand visibility.
4. **TECHNICAL READINESS:** Ensure your site is structured and accessible for AI agents, maintaining focus on AI-friendly formatting—a staple of SEO.
5. **CONVERSATIONAL CONTENT:** Shift focus from keywords to capturing intent with concise, focused content that AI can easily interpret for user queries.

## QUESTIONS

**GOOGLE SEARCH RESULTS NOW SHOW AI-GENERATED RESULTS AND ELIMINATE THE NEED TO CLICK ON SOURCE WEBSITES. DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ON WHY THIS CHANGE IS HAPPENING OR ITS IMPLICATIONS?**

The AI-generated search results aren't just pulling from one source. They compile information from various sites. The AI doesn't copy text verbatim; it summarizes the info in its own way. It presents a summary based on multiple sources, with links provided for each. While this particular example may lean heavily on one source, broader topics might draw from multiple contributors for the AI overview.

**HOW MUCH DOES SPENDING MONEY INFLUENCE DOMAIN AUTHORITY? FOR EXAMPLE, "A PLACE FOR MOM" SPENDS A LOT ON PPC CAMPAIGNS. DOES THAT SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT THEIR DOMAIN AUTHORITY, OR IS IT MORE ABOUT THEIR EFFORTS IN SEO, LINKS, AND OTHER STRATEGIES?**

Spending money on PPC might have some effect on domain authority, but it's not among the top factors. Domain authority is more influenced by how long the website has been established, its traffic volume, and the quality of backlinks. Older sites with higher traffic are deemed more credible, and backlinks from reputable sources like CNBC or The New York Times further signal trustworthiness to Google.

**SHOULD WE FOCUS ON SPENDING MONEY ON PAY-PER-CLICK CAMPAIGNS OR INVEST IN ORGANIC SEO? IF IT'S NOT A CHOICE BETWEEN THE TWO, WHERE SHOULD WE PRIORITIZE OUR EFFORTS?**

While I'm not an expert in both fields, from my understanding, PPC hasn't been as affected by AI as SEO has. Since PPC targets lower-funnel users, AI overviews and search results have less impact on it compared to SEO.