



SALES AND MARKETING ROUNDTABLE #274:

AI's Transformative Impact on Search

with Zack Collevecchio

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

ABOUT OUR GUEST

At this week's Roundtable, we were joined by Zack Collevecchio, Senior Data Scientist at WildFig and Pavone Group.

Zack shared how artificial intelligence is transforming the way we think about search. The discussion included a closer look at Google's AI-first solution to search (AI Mode), a demo of AI Mode and a look at what's next when it comes to AI and search.

A promotional graphic for the Varsity Roundtable Project. It has a dark blue background with faint, larger speech bubbles. At the top left is the Varsity Roundtable Project logo. To its right, the text "VARSITY ROUNDTABLE PROJECT" is displayed in white, with the tagline "DISCUSS. SHARE. LEARN. GROW." below it. A horizontal white line separates the header from the main content. The main content area features the title "UNVEILING THE FUTURE: AI'S TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON SEARCH" in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below the title is a date banner: "THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2025" in white text on an orange background. To the left of the date banner is a small, square, black and white portrait of Zack Collevecchio. To the right of the date banner, the text "FEATURING ZACK COLLEVECCHIO" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below this, in a smaller white font, is "Senior Data Scientist, WildFig & Pavone Group".



FRESH PERSPECTIVES

- **THE NEW FACE OF SEARCH** – With AI Mode emerging, search engines are transforming into answers platforms, focusing on delivering direct responses rather than link-based results. This shift marks a new era for search engine optimization, honing in on content's meaning over traditional keyword strategies.
- **CONVERSATION AS A KEY STRATEGY** – Search engines are moving towards a more conversational interface, enabling dynamic interaction with users. AI retains context and supports follow-up questions, making it crucial for brands to adopt a more dialogue-driven approach.
- **EXPANDING BEYOND WEBSITES** – As AI-driven platforms become predominant, owning visibility across diverse channels such as social media and online forums is vital. This multi-platform presence ensures messaging resonates with the AI, maintaining brand visibility against declining website traffic.
- **AI DRIVES USER JOURNEY EVOLUTION** – AI's role extends beyond information gathering to actively engaging in user tasks. Expect AI to start facilitating actions such as booking tours directly, highlighting a fundamental shift in user journey facilitation within industries like senior living.
- **PPC'S TRANSFORMATION UNDER AI** – PPC is likely to evolve rather than disappear, shifting distribution of advertising budgets across multiple platforms. As user engagement spans across various digital spaces, a holistic strategy is emerging in response to AI's growing influence on search behavior.

LINKS & CONTACT INFO

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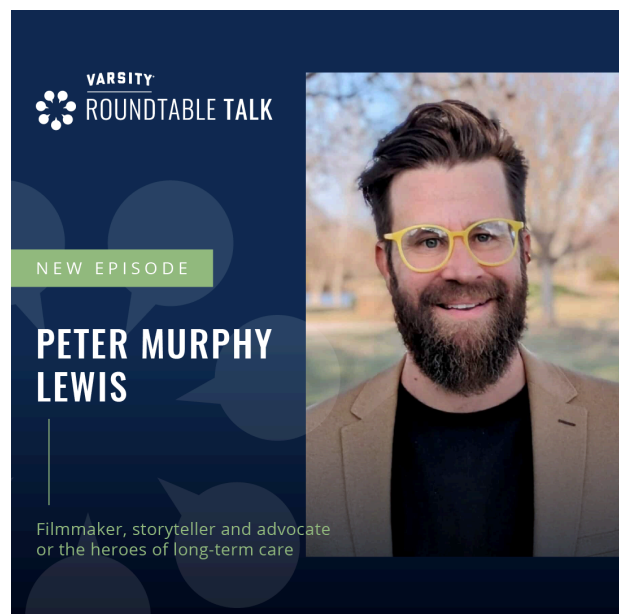
COMING UP ON VARSITY'S ROUNDTABLE!

Please join our next Roundtable gathering on Thursday, September 18 at noon ET, 11 a.m. CT and 9 a.m. PT for a special 275th Roundtable gathering. We'll be joined by Jennifer Smith from Mather Institute who will discuss their Age Well study.

NEW ON VARSITY'S PODCAST, ROUNDTABLE TALK

On our newest episode of Varsity's Roundtable Talk, we sit down with Peter Murphy Lewis, documentary filmmaker and co-creator of People Worth Caring About, a YouTube series that shines a spotlight on caregivers in long-term care communities across the country.

Peter shares how his grandparents' positive experiences in senior living inspired his work and why focusing on staff stories helps shift public perception. He recalls moving encounters in hospice, lessons about dignity and language, and how storytelling can inspire young people to see caregiving as a calling. Check out the [episode here](#) on the Varsity website!



Integration of AI in Search Engines



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 labeled "AI Overview". It provides a summary of the search results, stating that independent living is for active seniors who want a maintenance-free lifestyle and social engagement, while assisted living offers support with daily activities (ADLs) like bathing, dressing, and medication management. Below the summary, there is a "Show more" button. To the right of the AI Overview, there is a section labeled "AI Overview Sources" which lists several sources, including "Assisted Living vs. Independent Living - A Place for Mom" and "How to decide between Independent Living vs. Assisted ...". Below the AI Overview, there is a "Top SEO Result" section which shows the top organic search result from Hebrew SeniorLife, titled "Assisted Living vs. Independent Living: 5 differences".

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:

- Passive: 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/5-differences-between-independent-living-vs-assisted-living/>
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.

In our recent discussion, we revisited how AI overviews in Google are impacting search. With evolving content, we mainly focused on AI summaries influencing top SEO results. While these AI overviews showcase sources, they seldom get clicked.

Research indicates that people find the quality of AI-generated summaries quite good, which means they're often satisfied with the information without visiting the original sites. Consequently, these overviews aren't driving traffic to websites, as users tend to leave once they get the info they need.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS



1. AI search agents are going to lead to **reduced traffic** to your website.
 - a. Zero-click searches are rapidly increasing.
2. Ensure your website is **structurally sound** and easy to read for AI agents. Schema, markup - the format of your content - is as important as the content itself.
 - a. JSON-LD makes it easy for AI crawlers to understand your content
3. **Conversational content over keywords.** Since AI agents can 'understand' content in a deeper way, ranking for keywords will be less important.

The key takeaway from our last session is the expected decrease in site traffic due to AI integrations. As AI overviews become more prevalent, fewer users need to click through to sites because they get the information upfront. We emphasized the importance of ensuring websites are structurally sound to be easily navigated by AI crawlers. This helps your content be considered for AI overviews.

Additionally, the shift towards conversational content over keyword-focused strategies is significant. Unlike traditional SEO that depended on precise keywords, AI now interprets the deeper meanings behind user queries, changing how content should be optimized going forward.

**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.

The landscape around AI and search is evolving quickly, so it's essential to stay updated. What we discussed last time remains relevant, but it's important to acknowledge that changes are happening rapidly. New solutions and opportunities are constantly emerging.

As Derek might reach out again soon to get the latest insights, our approach will need to adapt frequently to tackle these challenges effectively. Being proactive and informed is vital in navigating this fast-paced environment.

- AI Mode is Google's AI-first solution to web search.
- Whereas AI Overviews incorporate AI into web search, AI Mode incorporates web search into conversational AI.
- Both are driven by the same underlying data; Google's index of information on the worldwide web.
- New breakthrough: Google's *query fan-out technique*.
 - Searching not just for what you said, but what you mean.

Previously, we looked at Google's AI overviews. Now, let's explore Google's emerging AI Mode, which isn't as prominent but is gaining traction. While Google's AI Mode takes center stage, this trend is likely to spread across other search engines like Bing, as they follow Google's lead. AI Mode prioritizes AI-driven results over traditional search links, presenting answers directly rather than directing users to external sites.

Despite relying on Google's established indexing process, this approach reshapes the importance of how content is displayed.

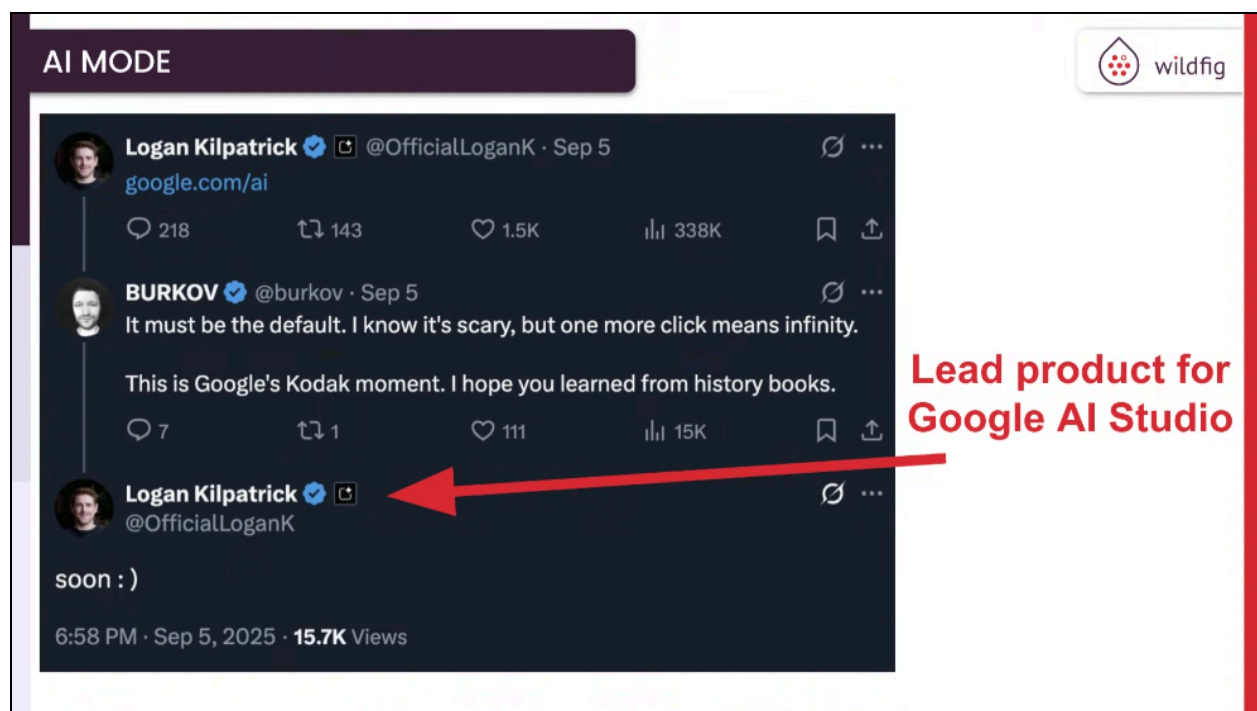
A noteworthy development is the "query fan-out technique." This method enables the AI to interpret the intent behind search queries, even if users can't name what they're searching for. It creates a series of sub-queries to obtain the most relevant information, enhancing the depth of search results. For instance, a search like "food near me" might trigger sub-queries like "open now" or "pizzerias," ultimately refining the information provided to users.

AI MODE			
	Traditional Search	AI Mode	
Focus	Keyword-based	Conversational, multi-turn queries	
User Interface	List of links for user to explore	AI-generated summaries with links to sources	
Interaction	Requires multiple clicks to find answers from different sources	"Deeper conversation" where AI understands context and can answer follow-up questions	
Content	Relies on keywords and domain authority	Uses generative AI to synthesize information	

In comparing traditional Google search with Google's AI Mode, the key differences lie in focus and interaction. Traditional search is keyword-based, directing users through a series of links, while AI Mode prioritizes a conversational approach, allowing for back-and-forth queries and context understanding. The user interface for traditional search revolves around navigating webpages and choosing links, whereas AI Mode provides AI-generated summaries, presenting relevant information upfront without requiring further clicks.

Interaction in AI Mode is more dynamic; users can ask follow-up questions, and the AI retains the context, making the experience more personalized. Traditional search relies on metrics like keywords and domain authority to rank content, whereas AI Mode uses generative AI, which can highlight content based on perceived relevance rather than just rankings or SEO. This approach is more democratized, as content could be surfaced based on its alignment with the query, albeit more unpredictably.

Both search methods are currently available, offering users the flexibility to choose between traditional search or AI Mode, depending on their needs and preferences.



It's anticipated that Google will prioritize AI Mode as the default search method. While currently available as an option alongside traditional search, AI Mode is expected to become the primary interface. This shift suggests that when users visit Google, AI-driven results will be front and center, marking a departure from the traditional link-based search experience.

Recent statements from Google's AI product lead indicate this change is forthcoming, amid ongoing discussions and adjustments in the search landscape. This transition is part of a pivot towards a more AI-centered approach, reflective of rapid developments in how search engines operate.



In a demo of Google's AI Mode, you'll see that accessing it is straightforward through a dedicated link or by navigating from the traditional search page. The interface initially appears similar, but once a query is entered, like searching for senior living options, AI Mode showcases its strengths. It quickly generates and processes multiple subqueries, pulling data from numerous sources—21 in this example—to provide a comprehensive response.

The AI Mode excels in conversational interactivity. It retains query context, allowing seamless follow-up questions like specifics to look for during a tour or cost estimates for one-bedroom apartments, even handling informal language and typos. This engagement resembles speaking with a knowledgeable assistant, enabling sustained dialog where the context builds over time.

One major distinction from traditional search is the reduced need to click through links, as users receive detailed information directly from the AI. The efficiency and depth of these AI-generated responses make browsing source sites less necessary, highlighting the shift towards a more integrated information experience.

NOW WHAT?



- **Reset expectations**
 - Website traffic will continue to decrease as AI search gains prominence. Traffic is simply no longer a KPI to optimize for.
- **However, reduced traffic does not mean reduced leads and sales.**
 - The same number of people are out there looking searching for your content, but your website may not be where they are getting the information from.
- **Monitor AI prominence with third-party tools**
 - Ensure you are factoring into the results being aggregated by AI and identify areas for opportunity.

With the advent of AI Mode, it's crucial to reset expectations regarding website traffic. As AI integration increases, traditional website traffic is expected to decline, making it an unreliable KPI for marketing strategies. Instead, focus on other indicators of brand presence and performance.

Despite decreased site visits, leads and sales may remain stable. Users are still searching, just obtaining information through AI-generated summaries. Thus, a reduction in traffic doesn't equate to a reduction in engagement or conversion.

It's important to monitor AI's role using third-party tools, as native capabilities for tracking AI source usage are limited. Even if users aren't visiting your site directly, having your content featured in AI summaries keeps your brand authoritative in the industry. This ensures you're controlling the narrative and maintaining visibility, which is vital as the landscape shifts towards AI-driven information delivery.

NOW WHAT?



- Search *Everywhere* Optimization
 - Maintain your online presence across multiple platforms. Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, LinkedIn, online forums. Your information needs to be accessible across the web, not just on your own site.
- Coming soon: Agentic search
 - Search engines not just as information gathering, but taking actions.
 - Prospects booking tours via generative AI agents - prepare to make your website AI-friendly.

The evolving concept of "search everywhere optimization" is becoming increasingly vital. As website traffic becomes less central, owning your brand's presence across various platforms—Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and online forums—is essential. This multi-platform approach ensures your messaging is visible and accessible, maximizing the chances of it being picked up by AI.

Looking ahead, we're on the brink of what might be termed "agentic search," where AI moves beyond just gathering information to taking real-world actions. For instance, in the senior living industry, AI could soon arrange tours for prospective residents directly, based on user requests.

Imagine asking AI to find and book tours at nearby assisted living facilities—it will carry out these tasks autonomously, streamlining the process significantly. This shift signifies a major leap from AI as an information tool to an active participant in facilitating tasks and decisions.

QUESTIONS

HOW WILL AI HANDLE THE BALANCE BETWEEN AUTOMATED SCHEDULING AND MAINTAINING A HIGH-TOUCH, PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCE, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THE NEED FOR PLUGINS LIKE CALENDLY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-QUALIFYING PROSPECTS TO ENSURE THAT THEIR NEEDS ARE MET APPROPRIATELY?

Maintaining lead quality is crucial, and there are ways to balance automated scheduling with personalized interactions. Pre-qualification screenings can be an option, but caution is needed to avoid excluding quality leads.

A practical step is arranging a pre-scheduled call after someone books a tour. This allows for an initial assessment of their needs and ensures they're a suitable match before the actual tour. It's about finding the right balance; while automation has benefits, it's important not to lose potential leads, especially if competitors are optimizing these functionalities as well.

HOW SHOULD WE ADAPT OUR MINDSET FROM VIEWING SEARCH ENGINES AS MERELY SEARCH PLATFORMS TO RECOGNIZING THEM AS ANSWERS PLATFORMS, PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE INCREASING EMPHASIS ON PROVIDING DIRECT ANSWERS?

Certainly, especially within our industry, the focus is shifting towards viewing search engines as platforms for obtaining answers rather than just information. AI is particularly effective during the early stages of the customer journey—such as fact-finding and consideration.

However, for lead conversion, users generally still need to access websites or contact information beyond AI interactions. While AI is excellent for generating awareness and consideration, the current landscape still requires traditional channels for final conversion, though this might evolve as AI becomes more action-oriented.

HOW DOES THE FOCUS ON GOOGLE'S DOMINANCE IN SEARCH ENGINES IMPACT OTHER PLATFORMS LIKE BING AND YAHOO, AND IS GOOGLE SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASING ITS INFLUENCE IN THE SEARCH AND ANSWERS SPACE?

The shift towards using generative AI engines in search may alter the competitive landscape, potentially affecting Google's market share depending on which platform best adapts to this new model. Traditional search engines like Google, Bing, and Yahoo are transforming to accommodate AI-first approaches, but new players like Perplexity, which focus on AI-driven searches, are emerging as well. These platforms aim to provide direct answers, minimizing the traditional reliance on blue links.

Each AI model, whether from Google, Bing, or Perplexity, weighs factors differently. Therefore, while the same query may be entered across various platforms, the results could vary based not only on traditional SEO considerations but also on the unique weighting systems of each AI model. This shift opens the door for alternative engines to challenge Google's dominance by excelling in AI-first searching capabilities.

DO YOU SEE CHATGPT EVOLVING TO BECOME A SIGNIFICANT SEARCH ENGINE, POTENTIALLY JOINING THE RANKS OF ESTABLISHED SEARCH PLATFORMS LIKE GOOGLE AND BING?

While ChatGPT is increasingly used as a search engine by some consumers, its integration with web search primarily aims to provide the model with up-to-date information, which is distinct from acting as a traditional search engine.

The primary function is to access current data to enhance the model's real-time response capabilities, given its training cut-off dates. As a result, while it can offer general insights, using it as a primary source for current information happens to be a beneficial side effect rather than its intended primary function.

DO YOU SEE A TIME IN THE FUTURE WHEN PAY-PER-CLICK GOES AWAY?

While pay-per-click (PPC) might not disappear entirely, its nature could evolve. Instead of focusing solely on search result clicks, PPC could shift towards a more holistic approach. This means that the budget could be allocated across various platforms like Instagram,

Facebook, and YouTube, depending on where users are engaging, especially as AI influences search habits. Essentially, while PPC might transform in scope and execution, it is unlikely to vanish.