

Search and Discovery in the AI Era

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For nearly two decades, destination and hospitality marketers had one primary concern when it came to digital discovery: **Google**.

The search giant's hold over consumers gave marketers a predictable model to work with—but with the growth of AI-powered search, that predictable model is changing fast. AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity and Google's own Gemini are fundamentally reshaping how travelers discover destinations, with significant consequences for destination and hospitality marketers.

Perhaps the most obvious of these has been a sudden and drastic decline in organic web traffic—according to global consulting firm [Bain & Company](#), **60% of internet searches now no longer result in the user going to a website**, as AI provides the information they need.

In the travel and tourism industry—where consumers rely heavily on the Internet for inspiration and booking—the effects of this revolution in search behavior cannot be overstated. So how can DMOs continue to connect with consumers with AI as an ever-present middleman?



In this white paper, we'll shine a light on the inner workings of AI search and share practical steps to optimize your DMO's presence in the new era of search.

The Landscape Shift

Over the past two-plus decades, digital marketers in every industry have learned how to function in an algorithmic and deterministic search environment with Google at its head. At the height of Google's power in 2018, the search giant held over 90% of the global search engine desktop market, per [Statcounter](#). As traditional search relies on keywords, optimizing content to show more favorably in search results was a fairly predictable process; more relevant keywords usually translated into more traffic being driven to a given website.

While Google still holds the majority of that market, AI is disrupting the search paradigm completely by giving consumers a different way to seek out information.

ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Claude are gaining massive traction with internet users, including travelers. Travel research firm [PhocusWright](#) found that four in ten travelers used an AI tool to research or plan a trip in 2025—an 11-point increase over 2024. These tools are generative and probabilistic, which means that they can do more than produce a link—they use probability to resolve uncertainties in the search process and create content that answers a user's query.

It's that generative quality that creates the issue of reduced traffic. Sites reporting decreased organic traffic aren't losing users to a competitor—the users no longer have to go to any website to get the information they're looking for. They can simply put a prompt into ChatGPT and find out what they need to know that way.

Even when consumers use Google or other search engines to make a traditional query, AI tools within those platforms can keep them from visiting a DMO's official site. Take Google's AI Overview as an example. These summaries at the top of the search results page can answer questions and make recommendations, and according to [BrightEdge](#), their presence on travel queries grew from 30-45% throughout 2025—a 50% increase. In a survey of web users, [Pew Research](#) found that users who encountered an AI summary for their query were 50% less likely to click any of the links in the search results. Needless to say, AI search is poised to completely rewrite the rules of internet use, particularly as it grows in complexity and accessibility.



So How Does AI Search Work?

The AI revolution didn't introduce just one type of discovery method: it added two. In addition to the traditional search engine results page (SERP), destinations now must optimize for both AI-powered search assistants (like Google's AI Overview or Bing AI) and conversational discovery tools like ChatGPT, Claude and Perplexity. Each of these require unique optimization tactics, so your overall search strategy must be more comprehensive than ever before.

Understanding how AI search functions—and how it's different from traditional SERP results—can help you come to grips with the new reality of search and discovery.

Essentially, there are three response types in AI search:

1

Pre-trained knowledge only: These models are trained on an established database of information, which means that the information you get will come from a specific pool of information. As AI models increasingly integrate information from across the internet, this type of response is becoming rarer.

2

Search-enhanced responses: This is the most common type of AI-powered search; examples include Google's AI Overview and Bing AI, plus ChatGPT and other tools with the search function engaged. These responses pull information from across the internet and summarize the results; they also provide links to their sources for further reading.

3

Real-time page access: When a user provides a specific URL in their prompt, tools like Gemini and ChatGPT can pull content from the specified page in real time. This ensures that the information is as up-to-date as possible.

A winning search strategy for your DMO website must include all three of these AI search types, along with traditional SERP search, to ensure maximum results.

How To Optimize Your DMO's Presence in AI Search

Here are a few practical actions DMOs can take to adapt their digital presence to the new age of AI-driven search:

Expand Your KPIs

In the previous age of traditional Google search, users had to see your page to engage with your brand and learn about your destination, which made pageviews one of the most important digital KPIs in your toolbox. Now, with AI search overviews and responses from chatbots, you can begin connecting with potential visitors without them coming to your site at all—but you need a way to measure that impact. By adding AI citations, conversion, scroll depth, time spent on page, brand awareness and sentiment as KPIs, you can get a holistic view of how users are interacting with your destination's brand, not just how often people click a link to your site.

Monitor AI Traffic and Mentions

Understanding how your destination appears in AI platforms can help you ensure that these new search engines are giving consumers correct, up-to-date information about what you have to offer visitors. Consider adding an AI visibility tracking tool to your analytics toolbox. These programs allow you to see what information AI provides when a user asks about your destination and to track how often your brand is cited in AI queries or responses.

Make Sure Your Fundamentals are Solid

LLM search platforms like ChatGPT and Gemini factor in a number of technical aspects when ranking pages and content. Basically, the more user-friendly and glitch-free your site is, the more reliable and credible it can appear to an AI tool. Ensuring your page loads fast, is optimized for mobile and features clean URLs, schema markup and accurate alt text can help you prove your credibility to an AI tool—and it will improve your site's overall user experience as well.

Craft Relevant, Fact-Forward Content

Once AI has determined your site is a good source for information, you'll need to make it easy for the tool to get accurate, relevant information to deliver to the end user. Here are a few tactics you can use to make sure your content is AI-friendly:

- » **Choose content types that are accessible to AI tools.** Content formats with clear questions, answers or steps are easier for AI to parse. FAQ pieces, comparison tables and how-to guides are great examples of content that works well for both humans and AI.

- » **Craft content pieces with clear structures:** Headings, subheadings and bulleted lists help AI tools find the information they need quickly and effectively. This is also a great way to improve readability for human users on your website.
- » **Build your titles around user questions, rather than keywords.** This is called User-Intent-First writing. For example, a beach destination might title a resource “Where to Park at Beach XYZ,” which makes this an obvious source for an AI to pull information for a related query.
- » **Use natural, conversational language.** When an AI tool is generating a response to a query, it attempts to create a conversational tone. If your content mirrors that, it will make it easier for the AI tool to translate the information without losing any accuracy.

Don't Forget to E-E-A-T

E-E-A-T is an SEO framework, used by Google, that means Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. Essentially, it's a reminder to lean into what only you can provide: local expertise and real experiences. While AI can collect information and present it to a user in an easy-to-read way, it can't replace local knowledge and passion for a destination. By featuring real stories of travelers, residents, local businesses and other people in your community—including named authors with credentials—you provide the human element, which is a key component of consumer trust.

Go Beyond Your DMO Website

Part of what makes AI such a unique tool is its ability to synthesize information from a wide range of sources; this means that you need to tell your story consistently and meaningfully across multiple channels. Here are some ways you can do that:

- » **Monitor third-party mentions:** From reviews to social media comments, it's important to understand how people are portraying your destination online. AI tools pull from sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor—as well as from across social media—and what people say about you becomes a part of the story that an AI tool will tell.
- » **Build your reputation across channels:** It's never been so important to have a consistent presence on social media, digital platforms and more. This is particularly relevant for platform-specific visibility, like Meta AI, since most social media can now be indexed by search. Establishing a core message and disseminating it across all your channels gives you the opportunity to shape how an AI tool speaks about your destination.
- » **Partner with right-fit organizations and platforms:** Your brand can gain credibility through third-party placements in digital media publications, influencer content and more. By aligning yourself with creators and brands whose values resonate with yours, you can boost your visibility among AI tools while keeping your story authentic.



Conclusion

While Google still dominates the internet search landscape, AI is changing the way that travelers search for information and inspiration. As new tools offer multiple paths to discovery (that may not result in organic traffic), destinations need to adapt to maintain a competitive advantage in the market.

Every destination's journey to AI integration and success is different—and at Miles, we're here to help. You can contact our team to learn more about our AI services and products.