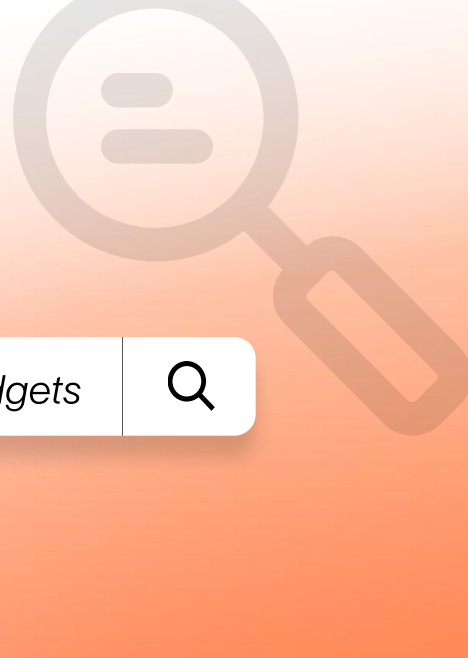


The Rise (and Fall?) of SEO for Consumer Brands



How CPG marketers are rethinking their strategies and budgets



Key Takeaways

- SEO still matters, but the old correlation between spend and visibility is breaking. That has major implications for how your products are discovered.
- Generative search changes discovery from ranked lists to synthesized answers, cutting clicks by 30–60%. Direct referral traffic is no longer a reliable measure of ROI.
- Data reliability, verification, consistency, and relevance now determine whether your product is recommended.
- To increase product visibility, the incremental marketing dollar should move from SEO expansion to AEO enablement: credible data, structured metadata, and verified claims.

1. The Rise of SEO: Why It Deserved the Spend

For two decades, SEO has been one of marketing's most consistent investments. For most of our careers, it has rewarded persistence, technical rigor, and scale. When done well, it made organic traffic one of the cheapest and most compounding channels available.

- Self-service tools like SEMrush, Ahrefs, and Moz gave marketers self-service visibility into competitors and search volume.
- Enterprise platforms such as BrightEdge and Conductor provided dashboards, workflows, and forecasts, often costing \$30K–\$100K+ per year for large brands.¹
- Agencies and internal teams crafted optimized content and restructured metadata, with retainers commonly running from \$5K to \$50K per month.²

The ROI was tangible. In the “golden age” of SEO, more investment usually meant more visibility—more pages indexed, more keywords ranked, more traffic driven. Organic search often accounted for 40–60% of web traffic for consumer brands.³ Even better: unlike paid media, SEO compounded over time, so every optimized page was a long-term asset. It made sense to keep investing.

By the mid-2010s, SEO budgets were well-entrenched and multi-layered:

- Self-service tools like SEMrush, Ahrefs, and Moz gave marketers self-service visibility into competitors and search volume.
- Enterprise platforms such as BrightEdge and Conductor provided dashboards, workflows, and forecasts, often costing \$30K–\$100K+ per year for large brands.¹
- Agencies and internal teams crafted optimized content and restructured metadata, with retainers commonly running from \$5K to \$50K per month.²

The ROI was tangible. In the “golden age” of SEO, more investment usually meant more visibility—more pages indexed, more keywords ranked, more traffic driven. Organic search often accounted for 40–60% of web traffic for consumer brands.³ Even better: unlike paid media, SEO compounded over time, so every optimized page was a long-term asset. It made sense to keep investing.

By 2021, roughly 74% of all companies were investing in SEO in some form,⁴ and in 2024 the industry exceeded \$80B in spend,⁵ reflecting how essential organic search visibility had become for businesses.

2. Why That Equation Is Breaking

The ground under that model is shifting fast. AI-driven search tools like Google's Gemini, ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Bing Copilot are changing how people find information.

Where traditional search delivered lists of links, these systems deliver synthetic answers drawn from multiple sources. Instead of clicking through to a brand site, users increasingly get their answer directly from the AI's summary.

That shift is already visible in the data, and it's accelerating:

- Businesses saw 30–60% declines in organic search traffic in early 2025 following the expansion of AI overviews in Google results.⁶
- The click-through rate (CTR) for the top organic link fell 34.5% when an AI overview appeared, dropping from 5.6% to 3.1%.⁷
- Users are issuing longer, conversational prompts in AI tools, asking hyperpersonalized questions that average 23 words, compared with 4–5 words in Google search.⁸

Many people will tell you “search” is alive and well, and we agree! The number of consumers using the internet to find brands, products, and services is not slowing. But the traditional mechanics of search—ranked visibility that drives human clicks—are changing fast.

The link-based leaderboard that powered SEO no longer governs discovery. Even worse, the fallback strategy of buying placement can actually hurt your visibility. Recent studies on AI shopping engines found that promotional or sponsored tags actually reduce the probability of AI-driven selection.⁹

Models decide what to cite or mention, and their criteria are different.

3. How AI Rewrites the Rules of Visibility

In classic SEO, algorithms rewarded relevance, popularity, and engagement as “trust signals” for ranking. In AI-driven discovery, the rewards go to credibility and structure—the signals that help a model trust and reuse your data.

From Rank to Selection

Generative answer engines like Gemini, ChatGPT, and Perplexity don't rank. They select. Their goal is to list an accessible set of recommended options, instead of all products that meet the prompt parameters. Research on Generative Answer Engine Optimization (“GEO” or “AEO”) shows that visibility no longer depends on ranking position, but rather “content influence”—how much a source shapes the generated response.¹⁰

The content that most influences AI is the one that the models can trust and verify:

1. It includes verifiable, supported claims rather than isolated assertions.
2. It is factually consistent, avoiding marketing spin or exaggeration.
3. It provides key facts, ideas, or wording that the model is seeking to build its answer.¹¹

In other words, creating and distributing content that is verifiable, reliable, and central to the user's query now matters more than building keyword density or backlinks.

From Keywords to Context

Keyword optimization once mirrored user behavior: people typed “best pet shampoo” or “eco laundry detergent.” In AI tools, those same people ask:

“What's a hypoallergenic, non-toxic, plastic-free laundry detergent that's good for sensitive skin and eczema?”



The query isn't three or four words; it's fourteen. It's not about matching a phrase; it's about matching intent and attributes.

AI engines parse these nuanced conditions and then adds context from its memory of previous interactions (What else have you searched for in the past? What does it know about your family's ages, allergies, or pets? etc). Finally, it searches the web looking for verifiable, factually-consistent structured data—like ingredient lists, test results, certifications, reviews, FAQs, and comparisons—that seems most relevant to the conditions and context.

That's why structured, machine-readable data, powered by verified product attributes and trust signals, are so crucial. Simple schema.org tags long-depended on for SEO are no longer enough.

From Popularity to Trust

In traditional SEO, authority came from links and domain reputation. In generative search, it comes from trust signals: factual accuracy, consistency across sources, and third-party validation.

Empirical studies show that generative models amplify sources they deem credible and consistent. In large-scale benchmarks, content verified by external authorities achieved influence scores up to 9/10—nearly perfect reliability—while keyword-driven baselines lagged far behind.¹²

Similarly, [Novi's own research on AI shopping behavior](#) found that products carrying verified endorsements or certifications were 230–259% more likely to be selected than unverified ones, while promotional tags reduced selection odds by up to 58x.¹³

These models don't “trust” marketing copy; they trust verifiable data.

4. What to Do About It

SEO isn't dead, and it won't disappear overnight—but its marginal ROI is shrinking. The investments that once delivered steady gains in visibility now yield less each quarter as generative answers replace traditional clicks.

Completely ignoring SEO going forward would undoubtedly be a mistake; but ignoring how consumers now search and discover products will be worse. At Novi, we recommend that our brand clients keep their SEO foundation—things like crawlability, site speed, clean architecture—well-maintained, but no longer rely on those levers to drive new traffic. We're seeing brands start to redirect and rebalance their “SEO” investments, both time and money, toward the levers that help AI systems understand and trust their data.

Five Shifts That Matter for Consumer Brands

- 1. From content volume to content clarity**
Models don't need more pages; they need more precision. Write to answer, not persuade. Eliminate fluff, highlight verified facts, and structure information clearly.
- 2. From keyword lists to structured data**
Make sure your schema and JSON-LD markup is clean and AI-readable as a baseline. Then invest in making sure the right attributes (ingredients, benefits, certifications) are comprehensively included.
- 3. From paid promotion to credible verification**
Invest in third-party labels, partnerships, or authoritative mentions. A citation from a trusted source will be worth more than a sponsored placement, and it's an investment that will continue to return.
- 4. From ranking metrics to influence metrics**
Begin tracking where your content or products are cited in AI-generated responses, recognizing that not all traffic will be referred to your own site. At Novi, we help our brands track the “share of voice” (how often they show up in model output) for both their brand overall and their products.
- 5. From link-building to data propagation**
Having a single comprehensive direct-to-consumer page is not enough if it stands in contrast with your product data that's scattered across the internet at your retailer and marketplace partners. For AI to trust your product, its data needs to be consistent everywhere you sell.

The economics are clear. Traditional SEO returns are declining as traffic disperses across AI interfaces, while early AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) investments create compounding advantages.

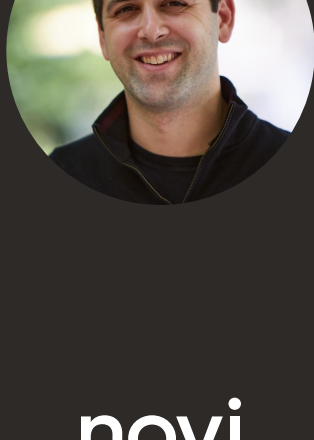
Generative systems exhibit feedback bias: once a source is cited frequently, it's more likely to be cited again.¹⁴ Establishing early credibility creates durable model memory. That means brands that standardize trustworthy, well-structured data now will have first movers' advantage to dominate AI recommendations later—much as early SEO adopters dominated Google rankings two decades ago.

5. The New Visibility Curve

Visibility Has Shifted From Scale → Quality → Credibility

SEO's evolution tells a story of shifting leverage:

- SEO's first era (pre-2012) was about visibility through scale: the more content and links you built, the more traffic you earned.
 - Its second era (2012-2024) was about visibility through quality: better, more relevant pages rose above noise.
 - This new AEO era (2025+) is about visibility through credibility: models will repeat, cite, and recommend brands and products that they can verify.
- The skills marketers built through SEO—technical optimization, content strategy, analytics—still matter. But their focus needs to change. Instead of asking, “How do we rank higher?” the question that marketers need to ask now is, “How do we become the source that AI trusts?”
- That's a data problem, not just a content one—especially when it comes to product discovery. And it's where the next generation of competitive advantage on the internet will be built for consumer brands.



About the Author

Greg Hollander | COO | Novi Connect

Greg Hollander is COO at Novi. He holds a Bachelor's in Economics from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, and an MBA from Stanford University. Throughout his career, Greg has played a variety of marketing, strategy, sales, and partnership roles driving growth at technology and consumer products companies. At Novi, he's applying his expertise at the intersection of CPG and tech to help brands turn verified product data into visibility, credibility, and growth.