

Google's AI Mode & The Future of Search

Experience & Activation

+ASSEMBLY

AI Mode vs. Traditional Search: Key Changes and Marketing Impacts



On May 20, 2025, Google **announced** that it was rolling out AI Mode as part of US search results. We are not ones for hyperbole, but AI Mode (powered by Google Gemini) is truly a transformative step in search – one which we expect to fully replace Google's search experience in the very near future. How is AI Mode different than traditional search results and what does it mean to marketers?



How to Access AI Mode (in the U.S.)

There are three ways for U.S. searchers to see AI Mode results:

- 1 Find AI Mode as a tab on Search (at the top left of the screen) after you enter a query.
- 2 Find it directly by visiting <https://www.google.com/aimode>
- 3 Open the Google app and tap the magnifying glass icon.

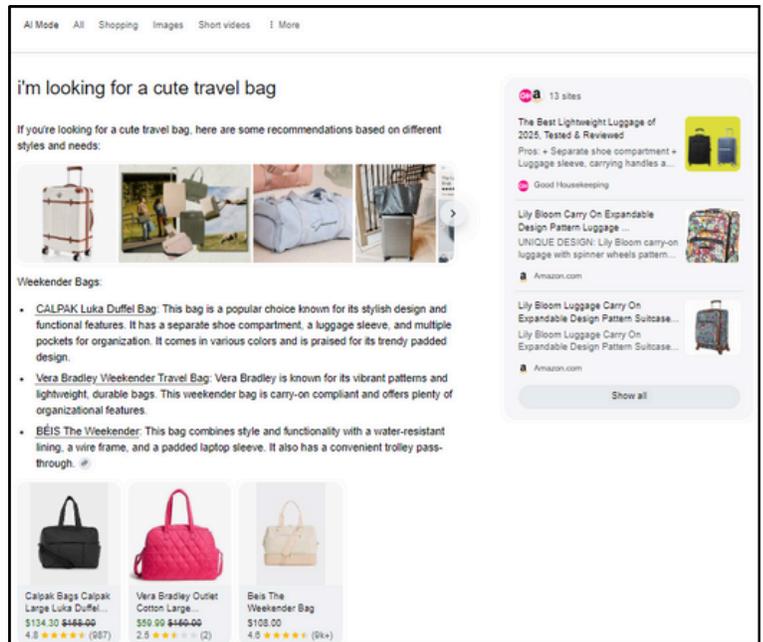
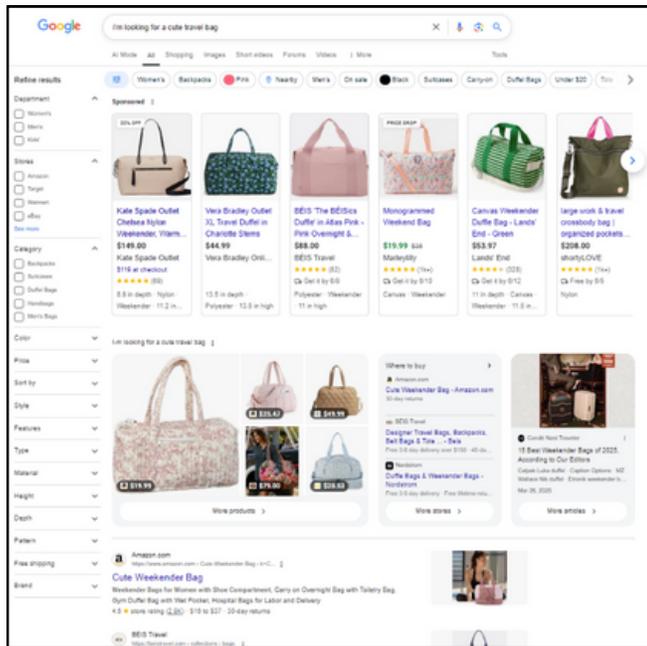


Understanding AI Mode (“What is it?”)

What do AI Mode results look like? See the results below for “I’m looking for a cute travel bag”:

NON AI MODE

AI MODE



Unlike traditional search where a query is tendered and content (results) relevant to that query are retrieved and displayed, AI Mode approaches results retrieval in a far different way:

1

AI Mode first uses a **query fan-out technique** that breaks down the searcher’s question into subtopics and issues a multitude of queries simultaneously on the searcher’s behalf. This provides more breadth and depth of information returned than a traditional search.

2

AI Mode is natively **multi-modal** – searchers can ask questions/have conversations about their own images or video + AI Mode understands images and videos better than what Google does at present, allowing it to better weigh the usefulness of non-text media in its answers



3

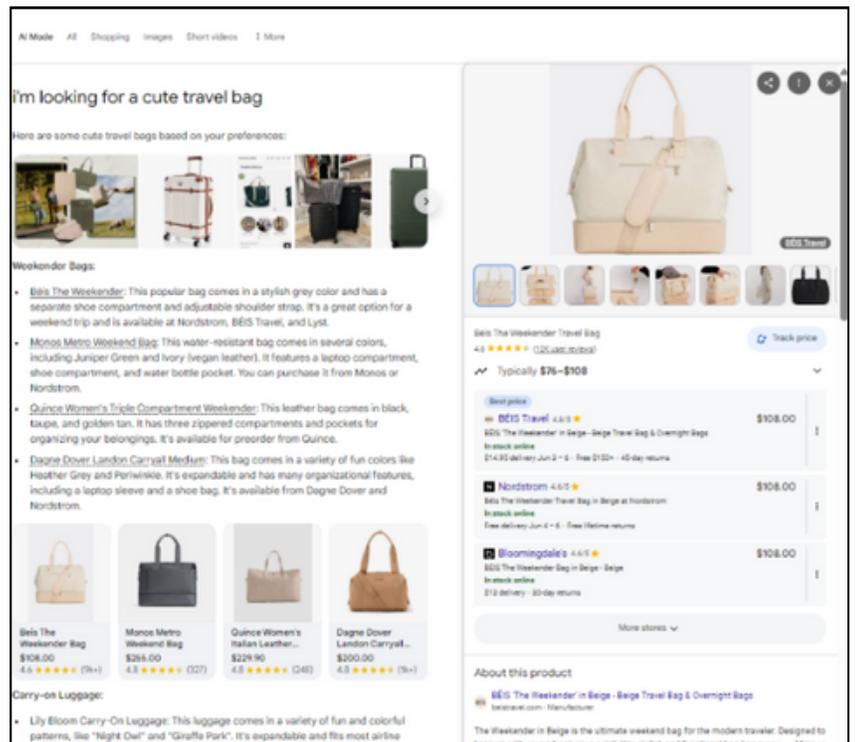
AI Mode leverages its great “memory” to personalize all results, even results from the same geo for the same question. This is not memory within the current session or knowing your location, this is personalization achieved through use of **user embeddings** (aka a User-LLM or user encoder), which are generated from analysis of user signals like past queries, click behavior, topical interests, devices used, and other relevant data across the Google ecosystem.

4

AI Mode is an **answer engine** not a search engine. The idea that Google is made to surface great web content for you to explore is secondary to their goal of answering what the searcher really meant in their question. For this reason, hyperlinks outgoing to websites are few and far between – currently we see them restricted to AI Mode’s references in the right column. Links within the AI Mode answer itself either trigger Shopping panels (see below) or keep you on Google while updating the references shown in the right column.

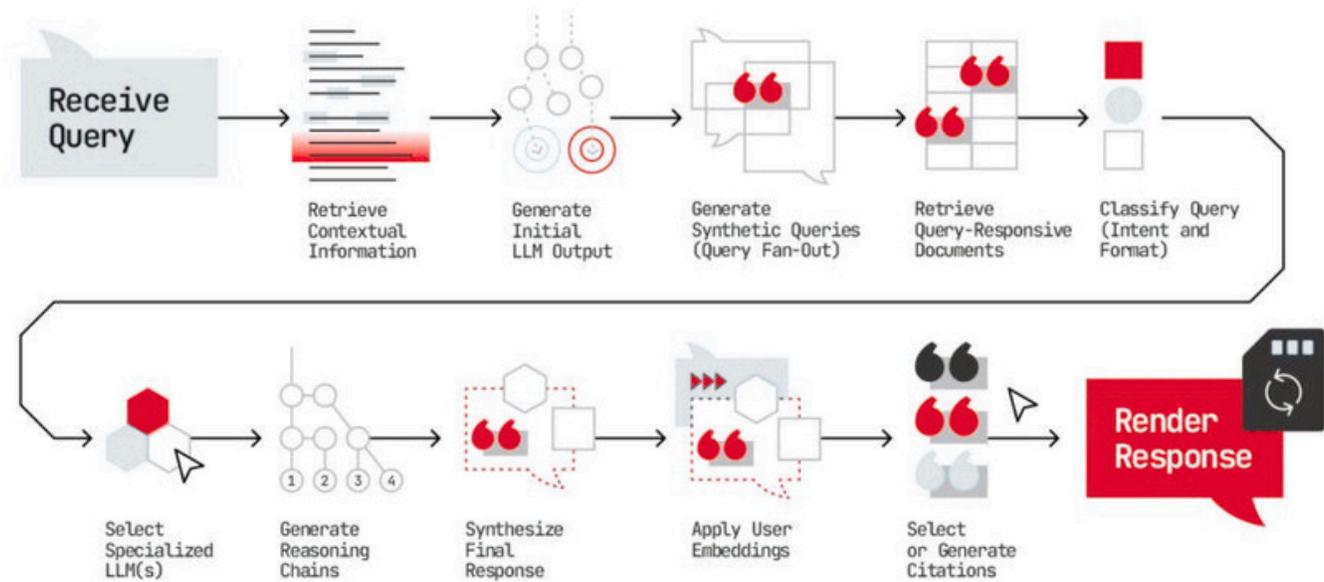
There is also a coming AI Mode feature called agentic search, although AI Mode itself is arguably an AI answer agent. Starting with event tickets, restaurant reservations and local appointments, an AI Agent can be tasked with gathering availability and/or pricing information and either serving those up to you to choose from or it can choose for you, given you permission.

Just ask, ‘Find 2 affordable tickets for this Saturday’s Reds game in the lower level’ and AI Mode will kick off a query fan-out, looking across sites to analyze hundreds of potential ticket options with real-time pricing and inventory, and handle the tedious work of filling in forms. AI Mode will present ticket options that meet your exact criteria, and you can complete the purchase on whichever site you prefer – saving you time while keeping you in control.” Source: <https://blog.google/products/search/google-search-ai-mode-update/#agentic-capabilities>



Agentic search has far reaching implications for how brands interact with (potential) consumers that we will discuss in the next section.

With the above information, we can now understand the following excellent graphic which summarizes how AI Mode works:



Strategic Implications of AI Mode (“What does it mean?”)

Why are we calling AI Mode transformative? There are many very technical reasons but the transformative implications for brands are:

- 01 AI Mode shows Google is no longer treating AI like just another listing type it chooses to return to searchers. It fully shifts search from a query model to a conversational model, which is what made ChatGPT so revolutionary (not its AI model itself, we’d argue).
- 02 It puts a nail in the coffin of keyword-based or lexical optimization (which rightfully should have happened years ago). Tools for assessing and optimizing content need to change accordingly. (LLMs do not analyze content based on query occurrence, they analyze by turning words into embedded vectors where cosine similarity, entity analysis and topical clustering are used to determine what truly equals “quality” content.)

03 AI Mode's generative approach and inclusion of hyperlinks to source websites almost as an afterthought means conventional SEO/organic KPIs should be reconsidered. Recent studies show that the presence of AI Overviews cost websites 34% or more of the traffic they formerly received from a query. We can no longer measure the impact of SEO solely by analyzing rankings and last click traffic and revenue.

Historically, the organic channel has been a hybrid performance+brand channel. AI Mode inverts this and casts SEO/organic as a brand+performance channel. SEO must now measure its success not just by prominence of the brand's website in clickable AI references but also by:

- Share of voice (visibility) across AI/LLM systems for high value prompts/topics
- Topical co-citation of the brand across the web
- Attribution or media mix modeling to show organic value as opposed to over deterministic last-click attribution

04 AI Mode relies much more on brand, topical and social signals than traditional search. To succeed in an AI Mode environment, a brand's online footprint must be comprehensive, current, and well-managed. It is said SEO pros will become "relevance engineers". Brands that do not manage their content presence holistically will be excluded from AI Mode or, even worse, inaccurately, or incompletely represented by outdated data scraped from the web.

05 [prediction] It's going to change how Chrome works:

- AI Mode will replace the Chrome address bar (based on DOJ Trial Exhibit-PXRD014: U.S. and Plaintiff States v. Google LLC [2020])
- AI Mode uses Chrome clickstream data as part of its user embeddings, creating conflicts that appear to be driving toward a Chrome divestiture.

Understanding AI Mode ("What is it?")

What should brands do to maximize their preparedness and presence in AI Mode and LLMs like ChatGPT as they grow in importance?

1. Continue developing deep, well-structured, semantically-rich content in clusters that show your brand's unique expertise on target topics while addressing multiple user intents. Your competitors should "look small" next to your coverage of the topic.
2. Renew focus on structured data / schema markup to "feed the machine(s)".
3. Renew focus on topical, non-text content.



4. Assess, improve and properly track your brand's free Google Shopping listings.
5. Make sure topical Share of Voice is a SEO KPI tracked/reported.
6. Assess and improve AI's knowledge of your "brand entity": use homepage Organization schema, develop/update business profiles, cultivate mentions of your brand on authoritative sites (aka PR), review your brand's social profiles for accuracy, review how your brand is described in Wikipedia and/or Wikidata, review what topics are mentioned in the same page as your brand, claim and control your local profiles, etc.
7. Assess and improve brand sentiment and topical representation within social networks.

Nearly all of these things require new tools and reports to be effective. We could go ultra-deep and talk about AI Mode meaning, tactically, that we use cosine similarity tools for assessing content optimization but, for the purpose of this POV, developing those tools, methodologies and reports are our job as SEO professionals.

Big Picture

More impactful than AI as a technology is the idea that Google's AI Mode and conversational LLMs represent a paradigm shift in searcher behavior, emphasizing the need for SEO professionals and brands to adapt to a generative, AI-driven landscape. By embracing new tools, deep, structured content, brand authority, and cross-channel touchpoints, stakeholders can navigate this new terrain and maintain their digital prominence. We'll leave you with this:

- From keyword targeting → To topical authority and content depth
- From optimizing for exact match keywords → To optimizing for semantic relevance and natural language
- From writing for search engines → To writing for user intent and AI interpretation
- From structured keyword placement → To contextual, conversational content design
- From backlinks → To citations
- From creating pages for every keyword variation → To creating comprehensive resources that cover a topic holistically
- From metadata optimization as a primary lever → To structured data and schema markup as critical context for AI
- From click-through rate (CTR) optimization → To answer optimization for AI overviews and zero-click results
- From siloed content strategy → To interconnected content ecosystems powered by internal linking and topical clusters
- From manual competitive research → To leveraging AI for real-time SERP analysis and content gap identification
- From traditional ranking factors → To machine-learning-informed search systems (e.g., RankBrain, BERT, MUM, Gemini)
- From publishing based on calendar cadence → To publishing based on user journeys and intent pathways
- From SEO as a technical checklist → To SEO as a holistic strategy integrating UX, content, and AI readiness



