

Quick Answer: AI Search and Product Discovery Revolution: Will Your Digital Commerce Experience Keep Up?

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Initiatives: [Digital Commerce](#)

AI, particularly LLM-based GenAI, is transforming both internet search and site search, as well as navigation. Digital commerce leaders must grasp the evolving landscape of search and product discovery and its impact on customer expectations, or risk losing customers to superior experiences.

Quick Answer

How is AI impacting search and product discovery?

AI is transforming the search and product discovery landscape via GenAI-based and agentic UIs, hybrid search capabilities, relevancy ranking and optimization, algorithmic merchandising, the need for generative engine optimization (GEO), and guided selling assistants, all of which improve the speed and accuracy of product discovery.

More Detail

GenAI is transforming web search as users move toward asking questions, not searching with keywords, and are increasingly taking search traffic from traditional web search for research and discovery (see [Preserve Website Visibility as Generative AI Disrupts SEO](#)). There is a growing threat to websites as the primary user interface for customers, as LLMs provide information and agents carry out tasks on behalf of users. The focus is shifting to “feeding” the LLMs and agents, not just providing human-centric UIs. Organizations need to prepare for this new world. However, in the medium term, it is expected that:

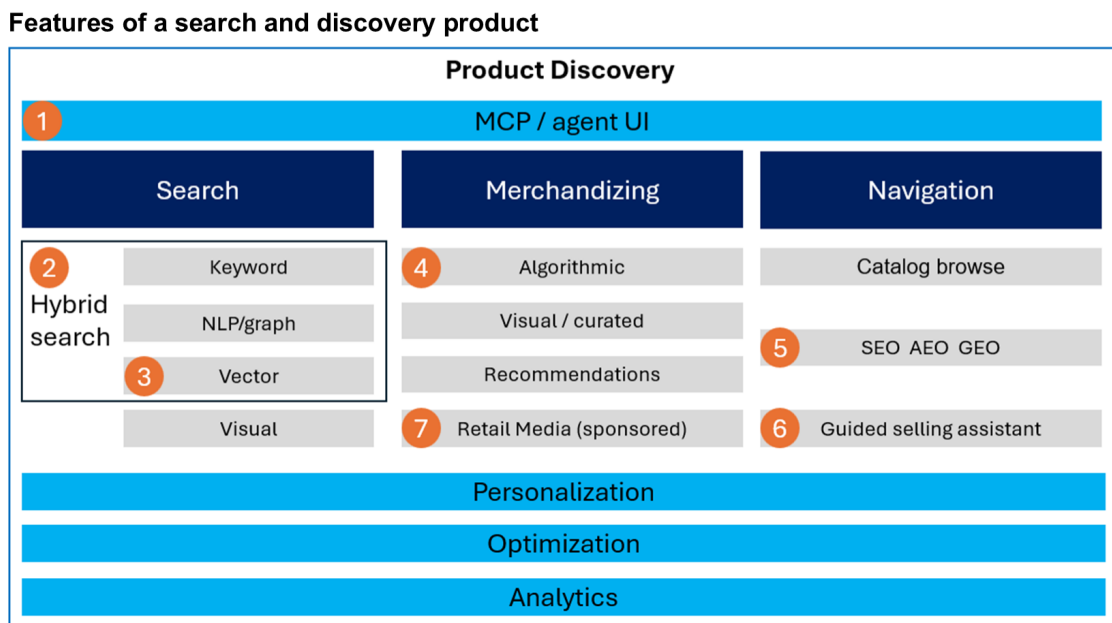
- Customers will expect organizations to maintain their own branded web presence that can be accessed directly when needed.
- Customer expectation of on-site search and product discovery (S&PD) will be that it should behave like GenAI platforms.

- This may extend to the entire buying process, making product discovery part of a wider “commerce GPT” interface.

Currently, the LLMs underlying most GenAI platforms, such as Google Gemini, rely on one-time, large-scale, iterative training on web content. For product discovery, they currently rely heavily on retrieval-augmented generation (RAG). In this context, RAG refers to using traditional web search indexes to bring back real-time results to summarize. Thus, organizations must continue to optimize experiences for both humans and traditional search crawlers, as well as prepare for GenAI platforms and their crawlers, e.g, via answer engine optimization (AEO) or generative engine optimization (GEO). Organizations are now beginning to provide GenAI-platform-specific product feeds for agentic commerce applications.

GenAI is being implemented in many applications to improve and automate back-end admin, often via GenAI’s “AI assistants” guiding use, natural language configuration, finding next-best actions based on data patterns, and providing content generation such as product descriptions and translations. In addition to these general application trends, seven key AI-centered innovations are transforming S&PD (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: Features of a Search and Discovery Product



Source: Gartner
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1. **MCP server and agent UIs.** Agents are already crawling and browsing, and are mimicking humans to accomplish tasks set by users. The Model Context Protocol is an open-source standard for an “API gateway for agents,” providing machine access to any tools an organization wishes to expose such as search (see [MCP Emerges as an AI Integration Standard](#)). Most S&PD vendors have, or are adding, MCP servers to support this, and indeed to support their internal innovation teams, as they explore the use of LLMs to power UIs for product discovery. Expect to see rapid deployment of such UIs, as customers expect OpenAI’s ChatGPT-like experiences when searching apps and websites.
2. **Hybrid search** between keyword and vector and/or graph is now well-established, providing a blend of efficient search for simple keywords (e.g., SKU search) with the intent detection of vector search for natural language or descriptive queries. The inference power of graphs is also widely used to support semantic search. Some vendors now have several algorithms running in parallel with AI to determine the best algorithm for a given query.
3. **Vector search** has become a basic requirement for digital commerce search. Although this was initially adopted to solve the “long tail” and “zero results” problems by understanding long queries, it is also vital to underpin RAG, enabling the current generation of GenAI to become the UI for product discovery.
4. **Merchandising has become algorithmic**, as AI can quickly detect patterns in customer behavior and dynamically tune relevance and ranking to optimize for business KPIs. Curated merchandising becomes “by exception,” i.e., when the business has external reasons for changing search such as excess stock or seasonal promotions.
5. **SEO/AEO/GEO.** Before GenAI, a shift from internet search to social media was already occurring, especially among younger demographics.¹ GenAI platforms are accelerating this trend, and may become the primary source of incoming digital commerce traffic, with product category and detail pages (PDPs) becoming the primary landing pages. Recommendations and other discovery elements must therefore be optimized within those pages. Additionally, these page types need to become better at providing the content underpinning GenAI: SEO becomes GEO, as content descriptions become more natural language and descriptive for easier LLM consumption (see [GenAI Is Rewriting the Model in SEO and Offering Solution Discovery](#)). As GenAI platforms themselves crawl and interact with websites, better product data will also remain critical (see [Optimize Product Data for Agentic Commerce Success](#)).

6. **Guided selling assistants.** Product finders, gift finders, and earlier attempts at “conversational commerce” mostly worked on curated taxonomies and faceted navigational elements to drive customers to the right product, or worked like a quiz via multiple-choice answers. GenAI, with its ability to understand a natural language, remember conversations, and use RAG to get grounded answers, can blend these paradigms without manual curation (see [Creating Compelling GenAI-Enabled Guided Selling UX](#)). Most of these tools remain separate from the main search functionality, e.g., as quizzes or chatbots, but they are likely to converge with the core product discovery journey as GenAI platform implementations become mainstream.
7. In addition to AI-related innovations, **Retail Media Networks** have moved adtech into overdrive, requiring websites that sell third-party goods to include sponsored results. While most S&PD products have the ability to add attributes to products for curated or rule-based placement, or to create manual merchandising, the provision of real-time bidding on slots achieves more efficient sponsored product results.

Where Will These Changes Lead?

The search and product discovery space is reacting to the emergence of GenAI by embedding its capabilities, but is also looking to a near future whereby search itself becomes a fully LLM-mediated activity. More agentic scenarios are being brought to market, whereby these tools take actions on behalf of humans.

For certain kinds of discovery, such as text-based research, knowledge gathering, and information summarization, GenAI has already won over traditional search. However, the human need to visually compare and contrast is typically required for product discovery. Product discovery and affinity are highly visual activities in many verticals, and a picture is, after all, worth a thousand words. This may explain the relatively slow adoption of the current generation of text-centric GenAI in this context, and adoption will improve as GenAI becomes more multimodal. If product discovery is “solved” by megavendor LLM platforms, stand-alone S&PD vendors may no longer be relevant. At present, LLM platforms still focus on language – i.e., “chatbot”-type UIs – not those of search and product discovery, although “under the hood,” many of the latest LLMs are multimodal, capable of graphical and audio input and output. Until multimodality is solved, commerce search may not fundamentally change, but it will add a new GenAI-powered conversational UI. In the short term, boundaries will blur among search, navigation, and guided selling assistants.

The development of deep domain/catalog understanding, e.g., via training vertical DSLRs, may well become critical to the relevance of S&PD vendors in the future. “Garbage in, garbage out” still stands, and the need for a deep understanding of a product dataset, as well as human intent, remains critical.

Recommendations:

- Be prepared for a shift in customer expectations, primarily toward LLM-mediated conversational UIs.
- Monitor how GenAI platforms such as those from Google, OpenAI, Anthropic, and Perplexity are evolving their search-oriented capabilities, and understand how they are evolving customer adoption.
- Look to vendors who are incorporating visual layout elements of product discovery in their GenAI offerings.

Evidence

Gartner inquiry

¹ [Social Media Overtakes Search Engines for Discovery Among Gen Z and Millennials](#), EMARKETER.

Recommended by the Authors

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[Use GenAI to Enhance Digital Commerce Search and Discovery Experiences](#)

[Quick Answer: How Digital Commerce Can Serve AI Agents Hired by Customers](#)

[Creating Compelling GenAI-Enabled Guided Selling UX](#)

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